From Popular Expression to Public Spectacle: History and Visual Testimonies of the Carnaval de Barranquilla in the XX and XXI Centuries

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FROM POPULAR EXPRESSION TO PUBLIC SPECTACLE: HISTORY AND VISUAL TESTIMONIES OF THE CARNAVAL DE BARRANQUILLA IN THE XX AND XXI CENTURIES

By

Francine Birbragher

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of the University of Miami in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor in Philosophy

Coral Gables, Florida

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FROM POPULAR EXPRESSION TO PUBLIC SPECTACLE: HISTORY AND VISUAL TESTIMONIES OF THE CARNAVAL DE BARRANQUILLA IN THE XX AND XXI CENTURIES

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This dissertation presents the Carnaval de Barranquilla as an ideal space for the safeguarding of rich historical cultural tradition despite the fact that it has been transformed from popular carnival into commercial spectacle. The study traces the organizational aspect of the celebration throughout the twentieth century. It also analyzes carnival parades as historical testimonies through the use of photographs as historical documents. The research concludes that the mixed-economy organization that has managed carnival for the last twenty years has provided an effective participatory way to administer the festivities’ official program. It also demonstrates that photographs provide valuable information not only on the history of the celebration, but also the economic, political, social and cultural context in which carnival occurs.
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INTRODUCTION

I felt the fresh breeze on my face while admiring the beautiful colors of dawn, and several birds, including a blue macaw flying over the garden’s blooming trees. Not far, the waters of the Magdalena River poured into the Caribbean Sea while the city was getting ready to celebrate one of the most important events of the year. I was excited and nervous. In just a few hours, I was going to participate for the first time in the Carnaval de Barranquilla’s Batalla de Flores parade.¹

My excitement grew as the morning went by, joining more than three hundred Marimondas² for breakfast at the Centro Israelita Filantrópico, riding the bus to the Vía 40, and trying to find the entrance to the site allocated to our group among hundreds of thousands of parade participants and viewers. As I walked through the mob of carnavaleros, street vendors, press representatives and policemen, trying to keep things as orderly as possible, I found myself in the middle of a street that, on a regular day, would look very different. I had driven by it during my childhood years on my way to the zoo, to the Club de Pesca, and to the factory and the rice-mill where my late grandfathers worked.

The avenue, a four lane two-way street that followed the banks of the Magdalena River, framed on both sides by some of the city’s most important industries, was originally built in the 1940s to facilitate the traffic of trucks and heavy vehicles

¹ Carnival in the context of this study must be understood as the secular celebration with pre-Christian roots that precedes the arrival of Lent.

² The Marimonda is one of the traditional costumes of the Carnaval de Barranquilla. For a description of major carnival expressions, see Appendix.
connecting the city with the rest of the country. Despite the colorful multitude and the large amount of advertising displayed in banners, walls, light posts and bleachers, built to accommodate the public attending the parade, it was obvious that the golden years of the Vía 40 were long gone. Broken walls painted with graffiti, remains of what were once important factories, broken sidewalks and uneven pavement, showed not only the decaying of the street, but also the decline of what it represented. More so, the Vía 40, which was first used to house the parade in 1991, was no longer an appropriate venue for the Batalla de Flores, which was overflowing with more than one million people.

My brief observations of the site quickly vanished as I began dancing and parading along the Cumbiódromo, trying to absorb as much as possible from such an incredible experience. Under a scorching sun and to the rhythm of porros and fandangos, I danced with over three thousand participants for several hours at the opening event of the 2005 Carnaval de Barranquilla.

For over one hundred years, barranquilleros and neighbors from Colombia’s Caribbean region have celebrated carnival in La Arenosa. The Carnival’s origins, like those of most European and American carnivals, may be traced to European celebrations dating from the early twelfth century and, like most Caribbean carnivals, present multi-

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3 *Country Club de Barranquilla, 70 Años de Historia, Urbanismo y Tradición* (Barranquilla: Sáenz Impresores del Caribe, 1996), 54.

4 Information provided by the Fundación Carnaval de Barranquilla, March, 2010.

5 The *cumbia*, one of Colombia’s traditional dances, inspired the name “Cumbiódromo” used to describe the temporary structure built along Barranquilla’s Vía 40 to stage the main official carnival parades, since 1991. The name Cumbiódromo is an adaptation of the Brazilian Sambadrome, built out of several concrete structures lined up on both sides of the Avenida Marquês de Sapucaí, in Rio de Janeiro.

6 The city of Barranquilla has been given several nicknames throughout its history. In 1847, General Tomás Cipriano de Mosquera called it La Arenosa after the sandy main avenue that crossed the town, known today as the Paseo Bolívar. Andrés Viloria Terán, Zenith de la Torre Silva, and Ricardo Guardiola Barrios, *Barranquilla: Estudio sociológico y documental para una monografía histórica de la ciudad* (Barranquilla: Efemérides, 1995), 58.
ethnic components that combine indigenous, African, and European traditions. Despite these common traits, the Carnaval de Barranquilla is truly unique in the way its multicultural roots have been represented for over a century by the guardians of popular expressions. This characteristic prompted Colombia’s government to proclaim the celebration “National Cultural Heritage” on November 2001. Two years later, on 7 November 2003, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declared it “Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Patrimony of Humanity.”

The Carnaval de Barranquilla is also quite different because it is celebrated in a city that has a history unlike any other on the Colombian coast. In some ways, the history of its carnival illustrates the history of the city. Unfortunately, neither one of these histories, carnival’s or the city’s, have been fully written. For the most part, they are stored in the memories of the elderly who transmit them orally or they are lost in time, which is why this dissertation, as well as the research currently done by local and international scholars, is particularly valuable.

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7 In 1982, Margarita Abello Villalba, Mirtha Buelvas Aldana, and Antonio Caballero Villa, suggested that the mixture of three ethnic groups –indigenous, Spanish, and African- was the basis of Colombia’s Caribbean culture. In 2005, Abello and Buelvas clarified that each of these groups was formed by multiple cultural groups and suggested that studies of Colombia’s Caribbean culture be approached from a multicultural or multiethnic rather than a tri-ethnic perspective. Margarita Abello Villalba, Mirtha Buelvas Aldana and Antonio Caballero Villa, “Tres culturas en el Carnaval de Barranquilla,” Huellas, No. 71-75 (Noviembre 2005), 113.


As I searched for the right methodological approach for my study, I found in Samuel Kinser’s book *Carnival American Style* several models used by major scholars.\(^\text{10}\) The first one called “normative,” adapted from the works of anthropologists Max Gluckman and Edmund Leach, compares carnival with other festivities and rites of passage, concentrating on “rituals of inversion” which alter the established order putting the world “upside down.”\(^\text{11}\) Although this model works when analyzing aspects of carnival such as the symbolic transfer of power to a carnival king or queen, or the universal tradition of trans-gender disguise, it is too specific to be used from a historical perspective.

A scholar mentioned by Kinser, Brazilian sociologist Roberto Da Matta, focuses on the reversal of daily roles and the temporary transformation of the norms and differences that define society.\(^\text{12}\) According to Da Matta, public events such as dances and parades allow people to share and to enjoy carnival without discrimination of class, gender, religion, or sexual preference. This unifying or democratizing characteristic is one of the universal traits of carnival but it must be carefully analyzed from a sociological and political perspective in order to put it in context when undertaking a historical study.

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\(^{11}\) Samuel Kinser indicates in his notes that Peter Burke, in *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York, 1978), 190, cites Gluckman’s work “as a useful paradigm for the explanation of Carnival’s ‘license in ritual,’” ibid, 201. Kinser also cites Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Le Carnaval de Romans* (Paris, 1979), who refers to Edmund Leach’s *Rethinking Anthropology* (London, 1961), 132-36: “Pour Leach… le temps s’écoule normalement pendant l’année puis repart brièvement en sens inverse pendant la durée festive, pour reprendre son écoulement normale au cours de l’année (ou de la saison) qui va suivre…”

The third model presented by Kinser introduces Mikhail Bakhtin, one of the most cited authors in carnival studies. Bakhtin focuses on the “engulfing quality” and the “reversible character” of European carnivals during the Medieval and the Renaissance periods, and deals with the temporary escape from established social rules and the inversion, ambivalence, consumption, and excess of carnival practices. According to Bakhtin, carnival transforms daily life structures into theatrical forms. The participation of different groups in carnival activities exalts sensorial activities such as dancing, singing, eating, drinking, putting on makeup, disguising, and other rituals that characterize carnival and dominate the spaces in which it takes place, including temples, theatres, and streets. His theory is commonly mentioned in most scholarly works on carnival because he addresses important issues such as the theatrical transformation of daily life, carnival’s symbols, and the use of the private and public spaces during the celebrations. In my opinion, Bakhtin provides a valid starting point for the analysis of carnival but needs to be complemented with other scholars’ models in order to provide the appropriate theoretical framework for a historical study.

Kinser suggests doing a comparative study over a specific period of time. For example, in his own study, he uses a multidisciplinary comparative model to evaluate issues of participation, generalization, and psychological processes in Mardi Gras celebrations in New Orleans, Louisiana, and Mobile, Alabama. Although it would have been interesting to compare the Carnaval de Barranquilla to another carnival celebrated in Colombia, such as the Carnaval de Rioacha, the Carnaval de Riosucio, or the Carnaval de


\[14\] Kinser, xiii-xxi.
Blancos y Negros de Pasto, time constraints did not allow me to do so. Instead, I have chosen to concentrate on the Carnaval de Barranquilla and to analyze the development of one particular aspect of the celebration from a historical perspective.

There are many interesting aspects of the Carnaval de Barranquilla to be considered. As Jaime Abello Banfi, Director of the Fundación Nuevo Periodismo Iberoamericano, indicates,

> The evolution of the festivity has been affected by many “tensions” throughout its history. It has been impacted by the transformation of the urban geography and the dynamic of the social and demographic changes that have given the city its metropolitan character. Barranquilla went from being a small provincial town, characterized by its familiar neighborhood-oriented life, to becoming a complex urban society. Its carnival went from being a popular neighborhood celebration to a festivity that features massive parades and needs to take into consideration the logistical challenges that planning events for hundreds of thousands of spectators and organizing security and prevention controls as well as media coverage present. From the economic perspective, carnival has become a multimillion Colombian pesos business that includes advertising campaigns, public relations events, entertainment services, entrance fees, lodging, liquor and food consumption, and the making of costumes and crafts.16

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of carnival from a historic perspective is what Abello Banfi calls the “modelo de gestión,” the way it has been organized and managed throughout the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century.15 At the beginning of the twentieth century, when Barranquilla was a small city, official carnival events were organized by the members of the elite. As the city grew, several government entities took over the control of the festivities but due to the bureaucracy and the political interests of the governments in place, they did not necessarily manage it in an efficient manner.

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15 Ibid, 23.
way or with the general population’s interests in mind. During the 1980s the celebrations were in clear decline. A group of citizens began to question the government’s role in the organization and supervision of carnival events and suggested different alternatives to recover and strengthen not only the specific events, but also the different traditions present in the celebration of the Carnaval de Barranquilla.

This study on the historical development of the organizational aspect of the Carnaval de Barranquilla follows Néstor García Canclini’s recommendation of focusing on the event’s management and control, and on the individuals and institutions in charge of maintaining carnival’s traditions alive. Although many of carnival traditions have been transformed from rituals to programmed commercial spectacles, a significant number of them have managed to survive and to assure the continuation of popular manifestations that “express ways of living and visions of the world which in turn assure the continuity of social relations.” My dissertation focuses on the study of the Carnaval de Barranquilla, which is in essence a popular carnival and an example of the co-existence and survival of different ethnic groups, classes, and socio-cultural crossings, in which the traditional and the modern historically merge.

When analyzing these kinds of cultural expressions, García Canclini suggests combining methodologies used to study the “cultured,” “the popular,” and “the massive.” In other words, to merge methods of art history, literature, folklore, and communication,

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17 Ibid, 340.
to contextualize this multidisciplinary approach within a historical perspective, and to include empirical works as part of the research, particularly oral and visual sources.  

My study pays special attention to the political processes at work in the organization of the celebrations and focuses on the fact that most carnivals in the twentieth century took place in societies whose main objective was modernization. From this perspective, carnival events not only favor traditional roles such as providing work and entertainment to the popular classes, but also promote modern roles such as attracting tourism and creating new markets for urban consumption. That seems to be the case in the celebration of the Carnaval de Barranquilla throughout the twentieth century. To illustrate this point, I present three specific “estudios de época” for the following years: 1903, 1942, and 1992. These dates were selected based on historical changes that occurred and affected not only the organization of the festivities but also the political, economic, social, and cultural conditions in which they were celebrated. Describing and analyzing the way carnival celebrations took place at the beginning, the middle and the end of the twentieth century also illustrates how traditions and modern appropriations of the Carnaval de Barranquilla evolved, mirroring the historic, political, social, and cultural development of the city.

From a methodological perspective, I put special emphasis on the use of photography as a historical source. Since Barranquilla’s historical archives house very little information on carnival due to the fact that for the most part of the twentieth century its organization was in the hands of various governmental entities which did not have

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18 Ibid, 16-19.
permanent headquarters, photography, complemented by oral history and written
documents, provided a valuable resource for this project.19

Archival research was conducted at the Archivo Histórico del Atlántico and Villa
Heraldo, in Barranquilla, and the Archivo General de la Nación, the Biblioteca Nacional,
the Biblioteca Luis Angel Arango, and El Tiempo, in Bogota. Only a few periodicals and
a limited number of official publications were found, making it difficult to gather
information from primary sources.

Lola Salcedo generously provided me with a copy of the Proclamation of the
Carnaval de Barranquilla as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of
Humanity-UNESCO, written under her supervision. Alberto Gómez Struss, manager of
Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A., provided copies of important legal documents. Ignacio
Bolívar Consuegra’s private library was an invaluable source for the bibliography. The
archives of Telecaribe and the Fundación Cinemateca del Caribe were an important
source for audiovisual materials. As a scholar, I am indebted to Alfredo De la Espriella,
founder and director of Barranquilla’s Museo Romántico and keeper of several archival
photographs used for this project.

I begin my study with a brief overview of Barranquilla’s history that describes
context in which the Carnaval de Barranquilla has taken place (Chapter 1). The historical
analysis of the Carnaval de Barranquilla throughout the twentieth century is done through
the “estudios de época” of 1903 (Chapter 2), 1942 (Chapter 3), and 1992 (Chapter 4).
Each date corresponds to a specific year in which a significant change related to the

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19Since the inauguration of the Casa del Carnaval in Barranquilla in 2003, the Fundación Carnaval de
Barranquilla began to organize the archives of Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A., which include official
documents and press clips from 1993 to the present.
organization of the public celebrations occurred. Finally, I analyze the carnival parade as a historical document, focusing on the use of photography as an important visual testimony (Chapter 5).

During the first three years of the twentieth century, public carnival celebrations were cancelled in Barranquilla due to the Guerra de los Mil Días. In February 1903, a Batalla de Flores or triumphal parade was organized to celebrate the end of this civil war. Chapter 2 focuses on this event. Although the event lacked many of the characteristics that define a carnival parade, Alfredo De la Espriella considers it the starting point of Barranquilla’s carnival history in the twentieth century. The parade was considered so successful among the members of the elite that from then on, and until this day, it has been featured as the opening event of the official carnival program, adding an additional day to the celebrations.

1903 also marked the first time members of the elite celebrated carnival in a public manner. Although they had always organized exclusive balls in private homes and social clubs, their participation in the 1903 Batalla de Flores marked the first time they transgressed the spatial limits that until then were tightly defined according to social classes. With the organization of the first Batalla de Flores, the elite took over the control of the “street carnival” which had been a spontaneous cultural manifestation of Barranquilla’s common people. This marked the beginning of the process of “institutionalization” of Barranquilla’s “popular carnival.”

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21 During the nineteenth century, Carnival took place on Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday prior to Ash Wednesday. After the first Batalla de Flores was staged on Saturday, February 21, 1903, it has been celebrated during four consecutive days, beginning on Carnival Saturday and ending on Shrove Tuesday.
In 1941, Barranquilla’s Mayor, Juan David Montes, created the Junta Organizadora del Carnaval de Barranquilla, a formal entity in charge of organizing all official carnival events. It reinstated the election of the Carnival Queen, chosen among the distinguished single women of Barranquilla’s elite, a tradition that is still in place and plays such an important role that most people refer to carnivals not by the year in which they took place but by the name of the queen.

Another important change promoted by the Junta Organizadora in 1942, was the relocation of the carnival’s inaugural parade, the Batalla de Flores, to the newly paved Avenida Olaya Herrera, far from the traditional carnival neighborhoods of Barrio Arriba and Barrio Abajo. The move illustrates the transformation of Barranquilla’s popular carnival celebrations into public spectacles and the rising influence of the government in the organization of the public festivities, which in the 1980s was to be blamed for the decline of the celebration. Chapter 3 explores these events.

1991 marked a turning point in the organization of the festivities with the creation of Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A., a mixed-economy corporation created by the private and the public sectors with the purpose of reinvigorating the celebration that, during the seventies and eighties, had declined due to lack of funding, unfettered bureaucracy, and political corruption. The creation of Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. was part of a larger democratic process that took place locally and nationally and included the election of mayors by popular vote for the first time in Colombia’s history.

\footnote{22 Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. “Estatutos, Escritura de Constitución No. 9 del 7 de enero de 1992.” Document provided by the Fundación Carnaval de Barranquilla, March, 2010.}
In order to fulfill its mission, Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. hired professionals to organize all official carnival celebrations. The mission of the corporation, which twenty years later is still in charge of organizing the festivities, is

(... to promote, foster, organize, and make possible all the activities and ceremonies directed towards the carnival’s success, and in general to support any event that benefits the promotion of the city’s tourism, folklore, and culture; to organize the Carnaval de Barranquilla, both nationally and internationally; to promote the city of Barranquilla and its carnival, nationally and internationally throughout the year; and to organize, participate, and promote all kinds of pageants and national and international events with the purpose of promoting carnival’s tourism.23

The official 1992 carnival program featured thirteen events including two major parades staged at the Vía 40 and an international beauty pageant. Private and public spaces provided multiple stages for the hundreds of thousands of carnival actors and spectators who participated in what had become the largest public festivity in Colombia’s Caribbean coast. The story of these changes is chronicled in Chapter 4.

Carnival parades, which feature thousands of individuals in costumes and dance groups, are not only living historical documents of the evolution of the festivity, but also of the city in which the celebration takes place. The final chapter of the dissertation, Chapter 5, focuses on the parade as a historical document. Photographs taken from 2005 to 2012 illustrate the way in which several aspects of the main carnival parades, the Batalla de Flores, the Gran Parada de Tradición, and the Gran Parada de Fantasía or de

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Comparsas, are valuable sources of information from a historical perspective. Professor Robert M. Levine’s work on this topic is a model and an inspiration for this chapter.24

With this dissertation, I intend to show that despite the transformation of the popular carnival into a commercial spectacle, the Carnaval de Barranquilla provides the ideal space for the safeguarding of a rich historical tradition. It includes numerous dances and costumes. The mixed-economy organization that has managed the official program of the celebration for the last twenty years has been an effective participatory institution that administers the official carnival events and ensures the continuity of the celebration and its cultural richness. From a methodological perspective, I intend to show how the use of photographs as historical documents is particularly helpful in the study of carnival as images provide valuable information that may not be obtained otherwise, particularly when archival sources or written historical documents are few and far between.

The research process that culminated with the writing of this dissertation was a long one and included many difficulties. The first problem I encountered was the complexity of the subject of study. The Carnaval de Barranquilla is a multifaceted phenomenon that involves hundreds of thousands of people, different forms of celebration, and countless events that take place in multiple public and private spaces on a yearly basis. The first time I traveled to the Carnaval de Barranquilla, in 2005, I realized that carnival was an overwhelming experience. It was impossible to see it all. I also realized that it was extremely difficult to do research during the four days the celebration took place. As a result, I had to travel back to Barranquilla on different

occasions to do research at local archives and libraries and to conduct interviews. I also traveled to Bogota to pursue my research at national archives and libraries. Narrowing the topic of my research was not an easy task. As an art historian my first impulse was to focus on carnival’s aesthetics, but I was reminded that to fulfill my academic requirements I had to approach carnival from a historical perspective. I soon realized that carnival did not have one history but rather multiple histories, most of which have not been told. I was intrigued by the origins of the celebration, so I began my field work doing archival research with the idea of tracing carnival’s roots to colonial times. Due to the fact that Barranquilla was not founded by the Spaniards and did not play a major role during colonial times, archival information is limited. Moreover, the fact that most government documents were burned during the War of Independence made it extremely difficult to find information on the life in the city prior to the establishment of the Republic in 1819. Another problem I encountered was that, at the archival level, very few documents document the lives of the common people. That is particularly true for the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century when most scholarly works and newspaper articles focused on the lives of the city’s elite class and the emerging bourgeoisie.

In order to do research on the lives of the members of the popular classes and their participation in carnival celebrations during the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries, I had to rely largely on oral testimonies. I interviewed individuals representing all sectors involved in the celebration, including danzas’ directors, current and former members of the Carnaval de Barranquilla’s board, Fundación Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A.’s employees, carnival supporters and participants. To corroborate the information, I asked
two university students and a local person who knows many *carnavaleros* to interview the same individuals at different times. Rather than asking specific questions, those interviewed were given the opportunity to speak freely about carnival and their own personal experiences. In many cases the information they provided ended not being pertinent to the topic of the dissertation, which is why many of the interviews are not mentioned in the final document.

From a methodological perspective, photography was a major source of information for this study. In the beginning I tried to locate nineteenth century and early twentieth photographs that would allow me to corroborate oral testimonies. I looked for family albums and personal photographs. I was able to locate a few pictures but in most cases their owners were not able to identify important information such as dates or places where the images were taken, making them unreliable sources for my study. I also looked for photographs in newspapers only to find that up to the 1940s, only pictures of the members of the elite were used to document carnival celebrations in Barranquilla. The “invisibility” of the popular classes’ participation in carnival in the press was very meaningful but created a void in my research. Fortunately, I was able to locate some valuable photographs at the Museo Romántico, which combined with images published in *El Heraldo* and pictures taken by several amateur and professional photographers that provided valuable sources for this study.

In *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction of the Interpretation of Visual Materials* (2001) Gillian Rose suggests analyzing photographs carefully when using them as historical sources.²⁵ According to Rose, there are three “sites” where photographs’

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meanings are made: the site of production (how the image is made), the site of the image (what it looks like), and the site of the audience (how the image is seen). When using photographs as historical sources it is important to analyze these “sites” as they may provide information important issues such as how images are technically manipulated, the reasons why they are manipulated, who the audiences are and why pictures were taken. Using photographs as historical sources has its pitfalls, but so does every other kind of research material. Different methods require different questions; as long as they are carefully considered, they are valid sources for historical research. Chapter 5 of this dissertation provides some examples of how photographs can be used as historical sources when analyzing the Carnaval de Barranquilla. Each of the areas considered in that chapter must be seen as an introduction to topics that may be developed in the future.

Other problems I encountered when pursuing my research had to do with the written sources. For most of the twentieth century there were no newspaper editions during carnival celebrations since all businesses, including the printing presses, were closed. At Villa Heraldo, many printed copies of El Heraldo newspapers were incomplete as pages had been ripped out, and no microfilm or digital copies were available. I found local libraries lacked books and documents not only on the Carnaval de Barranquilla but on the topic of carnival in general. I ended up scouring used book dealers in Barranquilla, finally purchasing many books and journals, which will be donated to a new documentary center that will be housed at the Casa del Carnaval.

Although working on this project was a long process and challenging at times, it was also extremely enjoyable and it opened a new area of study I intend to continue developing in the future.
CHAPTER ONE

BARRANQUILLA: THE CITY AND ITS HISTORY

General Information: Geography, Climate and Natural Resources

Fig. 1. Overview of the city of Barranquilla with the Magdalena River and its mouth, Bocas de Ceniza, in the background (2010). Photo by Francine Birbragher.

Because the general characteristics of the Carnaval de Barranquilla are so closely related to the geography, the climate, and the natural resources of the city in which it occurs, it is necessary to give a brief description of these before embarking on the actual historical study. Barranquilla has a privileged position on Colombia’s coast.1 It is located

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1Barranquilla is located at 10° 59’ 31” of North latitude and 74 degrees 47’ 42” West longitude of the Prime Meridian.
at the northern end of the Departamento del Atlántico, on the banks of the country’s most important river, the Río Grande de la Magdalena, twenty kilometers away from its mouth on the Caribbean Sea known as Bocas de Ceniza. Its location has factored in its development as an industrial, commercial and service center since its origins and has facilitated its communication and cultural exchange, not only with the country’s interior, but also with the Caribbean, the United States, and Europe.

By land, Barranquilla connects today with most cities and towns of Colombia’s Caribbean region. The vast network of paved and unpaved roads facilitates not only economic but also social and cultural exchanges. It is through these roads that people travel to Barranquilla during carnival times. The Carnaval de Barranquilla is in fact a regional event that includes participants from different areas of Colombia’s Caribbean region and in some instances from the country’s interior.

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2 On April 1, 1501, conquistador Vasco Nuñez de Balboa, geographer Juan de la Cosa, and conquistador Rodrigo de Bastidas approached the coast attracted by the striking color produced by the mix of the two currents, the river’s and the sea’s. The site later received the name of Bocas de Ceniza, which translates Ashes’ Mouth. Because the conquistadors arrived at the site on the day of Mary Magdalene, and were saved from a wreck, they baptized the river Río Grande de la Magdalena. Ignacio Consuegra Bolívar, *Barranquilla, Umbral de la Arquitectura en Colombia* (Bogotá: Editorial Grijalbo Ltda., 2001), 23.
Fig. 2. Map of the Departamento del Atlántico. Barranquilla’s Metropolitan area includes the municipalities of Barranquilla, Soledad, Malambo, Galapa, and Puerto Colombia (2011).
Geographically, the city of Barranquilla borders to the northeast with the municipality of Puerto Colombia and the Caribbean Sea, to the south with the municipalities of Soledad and Galapa, to the east with the Magdalena River and the Departamento del Magdalena, and to the southeast with the municipality of Tubará. Although Puerto Colombia, Soledad and Galapa organize their own local carnivals, they also have a significant presence in the main events that take place during the celebrations of the Carnaval de Barranquilla.

Today, the metropolitan area, which includes Barranquilla, Soledad, Malambo, Galapa, and Puerto Colombia (Fig. 2), covers approximately 154 square kilometers of mostly flat land with a few hills on the west, northwest, and north of the city. Interestingly, its topography matches its socio-economic stratification: The northern areas are mostly residential and include many upper-class neighborhoods, while the southern ones are mostly flat and are occupied by lower-class neighborhoods known as barrios populares. It is in these barrios populares that the popular carnival originated and where most of the traditional carnival groups are based today.

Barranquilla has a tropical climate with an average temperature of twenty-seven degrees Celsius. Climatically the city has four seasons: from January to April is the dry season or "summer," from mid-April to July is the rainy season, from July to August is the second dry season, and from August to December is the second rainy season, commonly known as "winter." During the summer season, the city benefits from winds

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4 Viloria Terán, 12.
blowing from the north. During the rainy seasons, severe storms cause great damage. Since carnival celebrations follow the Roman Catholic Liturgical calendar they always take place in either February or March, benefiting from dry sunny days and breezy nights.

Barranquilla is rich in vegetation. Laurel trees, almond trees, oaks, *matarratones*, palms, and citrus trees, bloom during the summer providing shade and adorning the city with multicolored flowers. It is common to see people gather under the trees to watch the carnival parades, or climbing up trees when the streets become too crowded. The hibiscus, the official flower of the city, is commonly used to decorate headpieces and *polleras* (long skirts) used in carnival costumes.

Barranquilla and its surroundings are also rich in fauna. A variety of fish is found in the waters of the Caribbean Sea, the Magdalena River, the swamps and the surrounding channels. The *barranquilleros* have a special affection for domestic and wild birds, and it is common to find parrots, macaws, roosters and hens in the homes of both lower and upper class neighborhoods. Since Colombia’s Caribbean region is a livestock area, it is not strange to find cattle grazing on the outskirts of the city. Donkeys, horses, and mules play a key role in the economy of the city as they have continually been used to carry water and light cargo in the poor districts of the south and the southwest of the metropolitan area. Both domestic and wild animals are represented in many of Barranquilla’s carnival popular expressions, including lions and tigers, a clear reference to the celebration’s African ethnic roots.

In the same way Barranquilla’s geographical conditions favored the celebration of carnival, its unique historical background led to the development of what is considered today the largest carnival celebration on Colombia’s Caribbean Coast.
Brief Illustrated History of Barranquilla

The city of Barranquilla was not founded by Spanish conquistadors, as were Santa Marta and Cartagena and, therefore, it did not play a major political, economic, or social role in the development of the region before the establishment of the Republic in the nineteenth century. However, it cannot be said that it had no history before the Republican period. Archaeological remains found in the areas of the Barrio Abajo and the Country Club, mentioned by Giancarlo Macchi Jánica, and indigenous cemeteries found in the perimeter of the city by archaeologist Carlos Angulo suggest that even though there were no settlements when conquistador Pedro de Heredia arrived in 1533, the area was inhabited before the Common Era. Unfortunately, the city’s urban development has made it difficult to pursue archaeological research and to further investigate the details of the city’s pre-Columbian past.

Spanish Conquistadors encountered many indigenous groups on what is today Colombia’s northern coast, including the Chimilas, who inhabited the banks of the Magdalena River and used the river’s mouth as a ceremonial site. Oral traditions indicate that the Chimilas frequented it in the summer to watch sharks eat food coming down the river, and in the winter to watch playful dolphins from the shores. Other groups included descendants of the Caribs or Galibi, who lived on the Caribbean Islands and on the tropical shores of the Caribbean Sea.


7 Ibid, 22.

8 Ibid, 23.
A controversial topic among historians is the story of the founding of the city. Most *barranquilleros* believe, as suggested by Domingo Malabet, that the town was founded by ranchers from Galapa who arrived on the banks of the river in the nineteenth century following their livestock during times of drought. Most scholars question the veracity of his version claiming that he based most of his assertions on oral testimonies provided by travelers, neighbors and relatives, making it difficult to confirm its accuracy. Furthermore, an investigation conducted by José Agustín Blanco indicated that there were no cattle ranches in Galapa at the time, which further demystifies the legend. General Juan José Nieto claimed Barranquilla was founded in 1629, but several scholars, including professor Palencia Caratt, question the accuracy of this specific date.

Most scholars agree that Barranquilla originated in the seventeenth century as a *sitio de formación libre* or *sitio de libres*, with the arrival of indigenous people from the northern part of Tierradentro, the name given to the area under Spanish rule, as well as Maroons and free slaves from Cartagena de Indias and its surroundings. Strategically located on the banks of the river, the *sitio* provided food and protection from the Spaniards. The difficult access through the mouth of the river guaranteed the freedom of its inhabitants during Conquest times.

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11 Consuegra Higgins, 17.

12 Consuegra Bolívar, 50.
Information on the history of the site during the Colonial period is sparse. Most notary and parochial administrative documents dating from 1550 until 1810 were burned during the military attack perpetuated by Captain Vincent Capmani on 25 April 1815, during the War of Independence.\(^{13}\) A document from 1710, located at the Archivo General de la Nación de la República de Colombia, mentions the Sitio de San Nicolás de Tolentino, an abbreviation for Sitio de Barrancas de San Joseph y San Nicolás de Tolentino de Camacho, a small port on the banks of the Magdalena River that towards the middle of the eighteenth century became an active commercial center where different activities, including the purchase and sale of goods, real estate, loans and mortgages, trafficking and smuggling, took place.\(^{14}\) The name Barranquilla or Barranquillas, as it was later called, refers to the site chosen by the first settlers who established themselves in the small ravines of the area known as Barrancas de San Nicolás in the late 1620s.\(^{15}\)

In 1772, the Spanish Crown registered the site as being part of the Corregimiento del Partido de Tierradentro. The first census taken in 1777 indicated the town had 2,633 inhabitants (2,586 "souls," 42 "slaves" and 5 "naturals") of whom 49.4 percent were men and 50.6 percent were women. The census also provided information regarding some of the activities that took place including shoemaking and navigation on the Magdalena River.\(^{16}\) Barranquilla was not an important port at the time. The main waterways that joined the seaports of Santa Marta and Cartagena with the interior of the territory connected with the Río Grande de la Magdalena at the Spanish colonial city of Mompox.

\(^{13}\) Viloria Terán, 36.

\(^{14}\) Ibid, 42.

\(^{15}\) Consuegra Bolívar, 48.

\(^{16}\) Ibid, 50-51.
Barranquilla’s history in the nineteenth century could be divided into two significant periods: The end of the Colonial era known as Período de las Reformas Borbónicas (1800-1875) and the beginning of the Republic (1875-1899). After the War of Independence (1811-1819), the nation’s centralized government led by the Conservative party favored the development of the country’s interior rather than investing in the peripheral regions. Republicans did not alter colonial taxes, policies, tariffs, investments in transportation and agricultural development, or mining exports. If anything, they reinforced the government’s interest in agricultural exports, particularly tobacco, and the import of manufactured goods promoted by the Reformas Liberales del Gólgota, benefiting the development of the largest coastal ports Santa Marta and Cartagena.

During the first decades of the nineteenth century, Barranquilla remained a small town. In 1834, the city’s population was slightly smaller than Santa Marta’s and half the size of Cartagena’s, but by 1851, with the arrival of immigrants from towns located on the Magdalena River banks and on the slopes of the Cordillera Oriental, attracted by the tobacco boom, Barranquilla had become the third largest city on Colombia’s Caribbean coast. The population grew from 6,000 in 1851, to 15,000 in 1884 as the city became the main storage place for export products destined for Europe including tobacco, *sarsparilla, palo tinte*, and *quina*. 
Fig. 3. Édouard André, design by E. Riou. *The aguador, water merchant in Barranquilla.* Etching published in 1869. Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango, Banco de la República, Bogotá.

Images recorded by travelers are valuable documents that illustrate urban life during this particular period. An etching depicting a market scene drafted from life by French landscape architect Édouard André, gives us an idea of what life was like in Barranquilla in the second half of the nineteenth century. André, a landscape artist influenced by European Romanticism, found in rural American landscapes the perfect subject matter for his work. In addition to documenting the flora during his trips to America, he illustrated scenes such as *The aguador* (Fig. 3), in which he romanticized the image of a local peddler in a market place, portraying him as an exotic character in a dreamlike location. The subject of the engraving is an unidentified “aguador” or water

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merchant, as indicated in the title of the work. The black man or mulatto rides a donkey in the middle of the town’s plaza. The fact that he is shown naked, except for a wrap around his waist and a hat to protect him from the sun, indicates not only that he is a poor man, but also that he lives in a region with a hot tropical climate. His job is to sell the water he carries in a wooden barrel, most likely a recycled European wine barrel, in the same way “aguadores” carry water today to places where there is no aqueduct. The man rides a donkey, which the artist dignifies by representing it as if it was a stallion on an equestrian monument, an animal that is still seen today on the streets of cosmopolitan Barranquilla pulling a “carro de mula” or wooden flat-bed. The artist purposely shows clouds of dust by the donkey’s paws to illustrate the sandy streets that inspired the city’s nickname “La Arenosa.”

The scene takes place in the town’s plaza where the market is located, in front of the church of San Nicolás de Tolentino, a long imposing building with thatched roofs and a tall bell tower. Men and women from diverse ethnic backgrounds, as illustrated by the two women depicted on the right side of the image showing distinctive white and indigenous features, gather in the plaza to sell and purchase products. Produce is displayed on both sides of the etching, on the ground floor in front of the “fruteras,” women selling fruit, which may be identified as bananas, and most probably citrus fruits or mangos. The contrast between the two women sitting on the right side of the image is striking. While one is idealized as a European white woman drawn in a classical style with clear contours and pleasant facial features, the second one, an indigenous woman, is shown wrapped in cloth and presents a serious almost unhappy facial expression. The
presence of men wearing *ruanas*, typically used in the mountain towns where the climate is colder, indicates the presence of travelers from the country’s interior in the city.

Fig. 4. Édouard André, design by E. Riou. *A street in Barranquilla*. Etching published in 1869. Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango, Banco de la República, Bogotá.

A second etching by André provides additional information on the growth of Barranquilla as a commercial center in the nineteenth century.\(^{18}\) From right to left, at the forefront of the image, barrels, wooden boxes, and palm leaves are displayed at the entrance of what seems to be the sidewall of the store of a prosperous merchant. A bearded salesman offers a product to an elegant bearded gentleman wearing a white suit and a hat, and holding a closed parasol he uses to protect him from the scorching sun of the tropics. Behind the gentleman a nearly naked black man walks away from the crowd,

\(^{18}\) Ibid, 12.
while two small thin naked indigenous or mulatto children stand in front of him looking at the goods displayed at the entrance of the store. A man wearing a hat, a poncho, rolled up pants, and no shoes, holding a cane and a bag in his right hand and a cigarette in the left, occupies the center of the etching. The fact that this individual who is smoking is the focal point of the scene may be a reference to the role tobacco played in Barranquilla’s growth in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Other details depicted by André in this street scene include a black or mulatto woman carrying a fruit basket on her head in the same manner *palenqueras* do today on Colombia’s Caribbean coast. She is selling her produce to another woman wearing a shawl, most likely a servant, since women from the elite class did not frequent public spaces at the time. On the left, a scene involving a woman with a high hairdo and a long dress with a *décolleté* showing her left breast, being followed by a white man, wearing a white jacket, long pants and a hat, carrying a parasol may be interpreted as a reference to prostitution.

The men and women represented in this market scene illustrate Barranquilla’s ethnic and social diversity, which has characterized the city’s population since its origins. From a material perspective, the storefront’s goods and the two-story buildings surrounded by palm trees in the background of the scene present a prosperous town, one that would become an important trade center on Colombia’s tropical Caribbean coast at the end of the nineteenth century.
Although drawings and etchings provide valuable information, they usually reflect the artist’s personal interpretations and are in many cases subjective “montages” of reality. Photography, on the other hand, can constitute a more objective source of visual information as it has the potential to offer more factual details.

An early photograph of the city taken in 1880 shows a view of the town’s main street, named Calle Ancha, probably taken from the roof of a building. It features the town’s main street surrounded by one-story houses made out of bahareque and with thatched roofs on one side, and some two-story houses of masonry with flat roofs and balconies overlooking the street on the other. The presence of both types of construction illustrates some of the important architectural changes that began to take place at the time. In the background, the image depicts a two-story building and the towers of the Church of San Nicolás de Tolentino.
The town’s square, located at the end of the Calle Ancha, played a significant role in the city’s life. According to Venezuelan architect Graziano Gasparini “the plaza was the most important urban center and the most representative of the (Spanish Colonial) grid plan.” The plaza was the center of the city and all main streets, such as the one depicted in the picture, led to it. It was customary to build edifices representing civil, military, and religious powers in its surrounding lots, such as the one represented in the photograph at the end of the street. There are significant differences between this photograph and Édouard André’s etchings, most strikingly the emptiness of the street. Although there is no written record that indicates at what time the picture was taken, it was most likely done early in the morning. Based on travelers’ notes written by missionary Felipe Salvador Gilij who visited Barranquilla in the nineteenth century, the main street was usually crowded and “people spent more time in the plaza than in their own homes or working sites.” Another interesting difference is the presence of native trees with wide foliage in the houses’ backyards, which contrast with the few tall palm trees depicted in André’s etchings, most likely drawn to give the images a tropical and “exotic” look.


20 Felipe Salvador Gilij, “Impresiones sobre la aldea de Barranquilla,” cited in Consuegra Bolívar, 55.
During the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the most important transportation hub between Barranquilla and the rest of the country was the Magdalena River. It was customary to travel in vessels known as *champanes*, moved by *bogas* of African descent. In his book *Tres Puertos de Colombia*, North American researcher Theodore E. Nichols wrote: “The *bogas* had a very hard life. They were condemned to work naked under the tropical sun, in a strenuous day from twelve to seventeen hours, for months and months, often forced to sleep buried in the sand to avoid being devoured by mosquitoes. These river men only dreamed of evading their miserable existence when allowed the opportunity to indulge in alcoholic orgies.”21 Besides

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describing the conditions in which the bogas worked, Nichols introduces an important aspect of their culture, alcohol consumption, which is a significant part of carnival and other celebrations on Colombia’s Caribbean coast.

The aquatint by Ramón Torres Méndez, dating from the second half of the nineteenth century, further illustrates the champanes, the conditions in which the bogas worked and the tropical landscape that characterized the banks of the Magdalena River (Fig. 6). The image shows how the voyage included more than one vessel carrying several passengers, pushed by numerous fitted blacks or mulattoes, along the riverbanks.

Fig. 7 Édouard André, design by E. Riou. The Steamboat Simón Bolívar on the Magdalena. Etching published in 1869. Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango, Banco de la República, Bogota.

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22 Ramón Torres Meléndez, Álbum de cuadros de costumbres (Paris: A. De la Rue, 1860), 2.
Attracted by the opportunity of benefiting from commercial activities stimulated by fluvial navigation, foreign entrepreneurs brought new technologies to the region including steamboats, such as the one illustrated in one of André’s etchings (Fig. 7). The new ships dramatically changed the conditions in which people and goods traveled inland on the Magdalena River. An interesting detail is the fact that the presence of advanced technologies did not impact the local population, as shown by the contrast between the large vessel and the small hut with hatched roof depicted on the left of the image.

Fig. 8. The improvement of navigation on the Magdalena River was one of the most significant achievements of the nineteenth century (circa 1890s). Photo by Fénix. Published in Ignacio Consuegra Bolívar, Barranquilla Umbral de la Arquitectura en Colombia, Bogotá: Editorial Grijalbo Ltda., 2001, 78-79.

A nineteenth century photograph by Fénix also illustrates the presence of steamboats on the Magdalena River and provides additional information such as the

23 André, 13.
rocky conditions of the river banks near Barranquilla, the deep tropical vegetation that surrounded them and the roughness of the waters. The fact that only men were at the site suggests that navigation was for the most part a male-dominated enterprise. The attire worn by the men in the foreground, pant suits with long sleeves despite the hot climate, indicate they were transitioning to a more modern way of conducting business similar to foreign societies in Europe and the United States.

In 1870, Barranquilla connected with Sabanilla’s seaport through a twenty-four kilometer-long railway, the first one on the northern coast of Colombia, propelling the city’s dominance of Colombia’s coastal export trade. According to Nichols, "the factor that really secured the commercial supremacy of Barranquilla-Sabanilla was the railroad that joined them. Its main section was built in the late 1860s, with immediate results. The railroad made Barranquilla-Sabanilla the queen of imports and exports from the Caribbean coast."  

24 Consuegra Bolívar, 78-79
The construction of the Montoya station by the Railway and Pier Company, inaugurated on September 20, 1871, completed the Barranquilla-Sabanilla railroad project. As seen in André’s etching, the station was a simple wooden construction with a thatched roof built at the end of the railroad track. It was not the station itself, but rather, the activities that took place there that benefited the city. Interestingly, rather than focusing on the actual station, André focuses on the activities that went on at the station. He depicted several groups of men chatting and waiting around numerous wooden containers and barrels, symbolizing the active trade that went through the site. Written

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sources, including an official decree issued in 1876, indicates that the customs office originally based in Sabanilla was moved to the Montoya station in Barranquilla, a city that by 1878-79 controlled the trade shipped by rail, river, and sea, and exceeded ten times Cartagena’s customs revenues and more than sixty times Santa Marta’s numbers.27

In 1887, the Railway and Pier Company acquired the line Barranquilla-Salgar and extended its network to Puerto Cupino, located on Sabanilla Bay. Six years later, on June 15, 1893, a new port structure built with the most advanced technology using steel and concrete was inaugurated. Puerto Colombia became the second longest port in the world after Liverpool’s, in England.28 By the end of the nineteenth century, Barranquilla had become Colombia’s most important port and moved sixty percent of the country’s foreign trade.

27 Juan Guillermo Restrepo Arteaga, “Educación y Desarrollo en Barranquilla a Finales del Siglo XIX.” In Historia de Barranquilla (Barranquilla: Ediciones Uninorte), 163-164.

28 Consuegra Bolivar, 84.
A street plan from 1897 traced by Cayetano Moreno and David Granados provides valuable information about the city at the end of the nineteenth century (Fig. 10). Although it is difficult to see in this reproduction, when enlarged it shows a centralized local government presence at the city hall and the municipal town council, as well as a strong police and army presence throughout the city, represented by the comandancia general, the military headquarters, the police headquarters, a police station, and a public jail. From an economic perspective, businesses related to Barranquilla’s port dominated the town. Activities included naval workshops, shipyards, and warehouses. The railroad and the customs’ administration serviced fluvial and maritime navigation. Due to its prosperous import/export businesses, Barranquilla became an important

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29 Ibid, 80-81.
financial center as indicated by the presence of the Banco de Barranquilla. Travelers stayed in guesthouses and hotels such as the Pensión Inglesa, Hotel Colombia, Hotel Bogotá, Hotel Sarda, Hotel Europa, Hotel Francés, and Hotel San Carlos. Manufacturing enterprises included a chest factory that supplied a much-needed item for travelers. Other businesses were printing presses, Imprenta del Diario Oficial, Imprenta de los Andes, Imprenta Americana, Imprenta El Comercio, Imprenta de Concepción, and food factories like the Fábrica de Fideos, a pasta factory most likely owned by Italian immigrants. In terms of infrastructure, Barranquilla offered the most advanced services including streetcars, electricity, as illustrated by the electrical cables and posts depicted in the photograph included below, postal, telegraph, telephonic, and hospital services.30 Barranquilla’s transition from small town to modern city also included the opening of cultural spaces such as the Teatro Ateneo, in 1870, and the Salón Fraternidad.

30 Consuegra Bolivar, 70.
Fig. 11. Aspect of the market and its street showing the city’s urban characteristics at the end of the nineteenth century (circa 1890s). Photographer unknown. Published in Ignacio Consuegra Bolívar, *Barranquilla Umbral de la Arquitectura en Colombia*, Bogotá: Editorial Grijalbo Ltda., 2001, 70.

Barranquilla had become a vibrant commercial port where people experienced an active life. The market buildings depicted in the photograph, inspired by European architecture, symbolize the urban development and the economic prosperity of the city. Despite the political turmoil experienced by the country due to a civil war known as the Guerra de los Mil Días (1899-1902), with a population of 27,548 inhabitants, the country’s most important fluvial and maritime port had a promising future at the end of the nineteenth century.
Early Carnival Expressions in La Arenosa

Carnival arrived at Colombia’s Caribbean coast with the first conquistadores and consolidated itself during the Colonial period. According to sociologist Edgar Rey Sinning, Santa Marta was the first territory where European festivities such as Corpus Christi, carnival, and the May Cross were celebrated, and this probably occurred immediately after its foundation in 1525. Although some members of the local elite and the clergy were opposed to the celebration due to the freedom and lack of order it promoted, carnival became an annual event, which by 1681 lasted from December 8, day of the Immaculate Conception, to Carnival Tuesday, the day before Ash Wednesday.

As for the arrival of carnival celebrations in Barranquilla, no specific date has been determined. Journalist Juan Gossaín indicates that between 1805 and 1815 families that migrated from Cartagena, Ciénaga, and Santa Marta began to celebrate carnival in La Arenosa. Citing a historical document written in 1829, sociologist Edgar Rey Sinning confirms that carnival was celebrated at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Sinning also suggests that in 1864 carnival dances took place at what is today the Paseo Bolívar, and indicates that in 1866 barranquilleros celebrated both carnival and the festivities of

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1 Rey Sinning, 2000, 99.
4 Rey Sinning, 2004, 45-46.
the town’s patron, San Nicolás de Tolentino, at the Plaza de San Nicolás. Scholar Carlos Arosemena J. suggests that Barranquilla’s “carnaval de ciudad” officially began with the reading of the first bando in 1876.5

How did carnival begin in Barranquilla and why is it still celebrated today when it is no longer practiced in other cities, including Cartagena?6 As previously indicated, Barranquilla was not founded by the Spaniards, but emerged as a sitio de libres. The melting pot that constituted Barranquilla’s population from its origins created a tolerant society that, although dominated from a religious perspective by a Catholic majority, was open to people practicing other religions and cultural traditions. Barranquilleros claim their society grew as an open and embracing community, making it easy for newcomers to feel welcomed and to rapidly become involved. They indicate that, most of all, barranquilleros valued freedom and individuality, which is why the city supported the campaña libertadora during the Wars of Independence.

If the generous and accepting nature of its people was conducive to the development of carnival, the openness of its public spaces and the tradition of organizing parades on special occasions closed the deal. Barranquilla’s streets have always been the favorite space for the city’s social life and have served as the venue for different types of celebrations including religious processions, a tradition brought by the Spaniards and continued by the practitioners of the Catholic faith in the New World. In his memoirs, Father José María Revollo recalled a procession that took place between 1876 and 1883,

5 Carlos Arosemena J., “Una fiesta tradicional. 110 años de carnaval,” El Espectador (2 de marzo, 1976): 3 B.
during the commemoration of the patron saint of the city, San Nicolás de Tolentino, celebrated on September 10th:

From the house of Captain Glen, began the procession presided by a priest, followed by a music band and a group of youngsters, burning Chinese firecrackers all the way to the temple, where they sang the *visperas*, answered by the nasal and un-tuned voice of a black man from Curacao (…) The day of the holiday (10) began with a new procession of the Saint around the plaza, at nine in the morning; upon the return of the Patron to the church, he was welcomed by the detonation of many firecrackers, the loudest being the last one called the *trueno gordo*. The procession was followed by a short mass. There were no more services because in the afternoon they celebrated the bullfights.⁷

Victory celebrations and military parades were also popular in Barranquilla. As a major stronghold of the insurrection against the Spaniards, the city celebrated many independence victories with public festivals. For example, the news regarding Cartagena’s liberation, which occurred on 10 October 1821, generated lively celebrations described in a document published at the time:

Although the official news were not released until ten o’clock at night on October 12, people celebrated spontaneously as in carnival festivities, with an outburst of joy, dancing, and all kinds of amusement until the following morning, when a solemn edict was released, with the presence of all civil and military authorities and with the cheers of the people’s continuous acclamation…⁸

The festivities of 1821, which lasted three days, featured several activities including the reading of the edict and a parade featuring floats, music, dance, and costumes. Reading the edict was a tradition inherited from colonial times when it was customary to read all proclamations communicating important information addressed to

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the general public in the city or the town’s central square. Twentieth century scholar Néstor Madrid Malo described the parade, inspired by European military victory celebrations, as follows:

Nothing better than those 1821 celebrations! On the 14th, following the religious services, two contrasting carriages were taken to the streets. The one brilliantly adorned with damask and mirrors carried a beautiful girl, richly dressed, represented the triumphant Colombia; and the other one, purposely ragged and torn, carried a man representing Fernando VII, looking dejected, near death, having lost his crown and scepter, and being surrounded by his ministers, aggravated by the confusion.9

Triumphant parades had their origins in the military victories celebrated by Roman emperors’ armies. The elements that characterized them, particularly those inspired by Greek and Roman allegorical representations were adopted and modified over the centuries according to the circumstances in which they were celebrated. These patriotic celebrations, and particularly the carriages featured in the street spectacle celebrated in Barranquilla on the occasion of Cartagena’s liberation in 1821, may be considered the precursors of the floats that became the main feature of the Carnaval de Barranquilla’s Batalla de Flores parade in the twentieth century. But before expanding on contemporary celebrations, it is important to describe the way carnival was celebrated in Barranquilla after the War of Independence.

According to Edgar Rey Sinning, three types of carnivals were celebrated in La Arenosa during the nineteenth century.10 The first was the “carnaval de pueblo,” a Christian-inspired festivity celebrated by the first migrants who arrived from different

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regions of Colombia’s Caribbean coast, particularly from the banks of the Magdalena River. This type of festivity followed the tradition of the rural carnival and was generally celebrated as a community event. As Barranquilla grew and distinct neighborhoods began to emerge, the festivity became a “carnaval de barrio,” a celebration shared by family members, neighbors and friends, usually with the same geographical background. By the end of the nineteenth century, people began to move from their original barrios to different areas of the growing city, as Barranquilla began to experience the phenomenon of modernization, which involved the emergence of social stratification. As the twentieth century approached, the barranquilleros began to celebrate a third type of carnival, the “carnaval de ciudad.”¹¹ This last type of carnival had three subdivisions, as Father Pedro María Revollo indicated. He recalled the organization of three specific types of “dances” in the 1870s, which distinguished themselves according to the participants’ social classes as follows:

Three types of dances, the first, the second, and the third were celebrated for three consecutive days, (on sites determined) according to the person’s social class. The first one took place in a salon or large patio considered exprofeso, the second one in the Salón Fraternidad, and the third one, known as salón burrero, for the gleba, at the public plaza of San Nicolás.¹²

Father Revollo’s categories illustrate not only the clear divisions that existed among the social classes during carnival times in the 1880s and 1890s, but also the fact that the upper and middle classes celebrated carnival in private spaces, while the lower

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¹² Revollo, 52.
class continued to celebrate in public places, the streets or the plazas, the carnival space par excellence.

The plazas were witness to some of the most important events of the carnival season for the lower classes, the *salones burreros*, described by Father Pedro María Revollo and Alfredo De la Espriella as follows:

Women attended the *baile de tercera* with *babuchas de tafílete* (leather slippers) and dresses of *pancho* or *regencia*; and the men, the most luxurious, wore shirts with *perchera rizada*, belts with gold or silver buckles, canvas mules, and *rabo de gallo* handkerchief tied to the neck.¹³

These dancing spaces, which opened on January 20, were decorated with garlands and welcomed couples dancing to the rhythms of primitive melodies played with *tamboras*, *millo* flutes, *flageolets*, *guacharacas*, maracas, and other instruments, by spontaneous musicians that stayed up until six o’clock in the morning.¹⁴

Alfredo De la Espriella explains the name “*burrero*” came from the fact that donkeys, used as means of transportation, were tied to the posts located at the entrance of the *salones* while their owners entertained themselves dancing to the rhythm of *cumbias* and *fandangos*. He also mentions that carnival dignitaries and honorary members of Barranquilla’s high society supported these popular dances organized in temporary quarters located in peripheral areas of the city, including the Plaza de San Nicolás, the plaza de la Calle de las Vacas, and the Salón del Negro Benavides.¹⁵

The *salones* also served as meeting points for the different *danzas* that participated in carnival celebrations. Although it is difficult to determine the exact arrival date of each of the carnival’s cultural expressions, documents dating from the nineteenth

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¹³ Ibid, 132-133.

¹⁴ De la Espriella, 2003, 8.

¹⁵ Ibid, 9.
century confirm the participation of more than forty groups in the 1870s, which means that by then many of the migrant groups were already socially organized and assimilated. Anthropologist Nina S. de Friedemann suggested that by 1881, carnival was well established in the city among the people with less means who lived in the areas where the city originated, particularly in the Rebolo neighborhood, one of the oldest and the keeper of numerous traditions. Some of its residents were descendants of the first migrants who brought with them the danzas de Congo and the cumbiambas, which together with dances featuring local fauna, were performed on the weekends and during religious holidays.\footnote{Nina S. de Friedemann, \textit{Carnaval en Barranquilla} (Bogotá: Editorial La Rosa, 1985), 48.}

In his chronicles, historian Andrés M.B. Revollo indicated that the Negros del Toro were very active in nineteenth-century carnival celebrations: “Formed by approximately one hundred members, dressed as dogs, cats, tigers, lions, and Negros, dressed with turbans and long capes, carrying objects in their hands, they asked for money and made people laugh.”\footnote{Andrés M.B. Revollo, “Crónicas Atlantiquences: Carnavales Viejos y Carnavales Nuevos,” \textit{Mejoras, Órgano de la Sociedad de Mejoras Públicas de Barranquilla} Año VII, Barranquilla, Enero de 1942, Nos. 42, 44, 45 and 65.} Alfonso Fontalvo, director of the Danza El Torito, founded in 1878, claims that the Congos were in fact the first ones to arrive in Barranquilla.\footnote{Alfonso Fontalvo, interviewed by the author, November 2004.}

Other groups mentioned by Andrés M. B. Revollo included the Negros del Garabato or Negros Congos, named after the garabato (sickle) carried by the dancers which symbolizes farming and death; the Negros Pintados, who painted themselves with soot and animal fat and walked on the streets half naked; the Indios de Trenza, indigenous groups who danced to native rhythms while weaving ribbons around a
wooden post, and the Gallinazos, a narrative dance that told the story of a peasant who went hunting with his dog and killed his donkey that in the end was devoured by vultures.  

Upon their arrival in Barranquilla, these cultural expressions began to appear on the streets during the pre-carnival season, which since colonial times, began on January 20 with the reading of the edict known as Lectura del Bando. According to De la Espriella, Mayor David Pereira read the first *bando carnavalero* in Barranquilla’s Plaza de Armas on 20 January 1865.  

This tradition has continued, almost without interruption, until this day.  

Another tradition dating from the nineteenth century that is still celebrated today is the Guacherna.  After rehearsing their dances and comedies, members of the lower classes went out late at night to enjoy the pre-carnival season in the streets of the Barrio Arriba and Barrio Abajo, playing music and dancing to the rhythms of guaches, drums, maracas, *gaitas*, and other traditional instruments. Their purpose was to warn people that the carnival was coming and that everyone should prepare to celebrate, to enjoy and to take advantage of the popular frenzy.  

Unfortunately, not all the carnival activities celebrated in the nineteenth century survived the passing of time. One of the most original was the Vara Santa, “probably the oldest form of entertainment and torture practiced those days,” according to de la

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19 Revollo, 42, 44 and 45.  
20 Proclamation of the Carnaval de Barranquilla as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity-UNESCO, 22.  
21 De la Espriella, 2003, 140.
Espriella. The Vara Santa was a pole installed at the old Plaza de San Nicolás during the three days of carnival celebrations. The Indios de Trenza captured all individuals walking without a costume and tied them to the pole rubbed with pringamosa, a plant known for causing stinging and skin irritation. Only people carrying a passport sold by the municipality for ten cents were exempted from the punishment. Father Pedro María Revollo’s account provides a slightly different description of the Vara Santa, which according to him had wild ants and the individuals in charge of capturing people were not the Indios de Trenza but the Piratas.

Either way, the Vara Santa was a good example of a carnival activity that integrated many characteristics of the European carnival such as the use of costumes, playing games, and celebrating in a public space. The fact that permits were issued to those who chose not to wear costumes during carnival times indicates not only that carnival activities were approved, but also that from the very beginning these provided a source of income for the local government. The Vara Santa was eventually abolished to protect the citizens from an activity that attacked their integrity, due to the abuse and excesses experienced by the captives. The spectacle was not in tune with the image of order and progress the city wanted to promote at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Another event celebrated in the nineteenth century that was later abolished was the Conquista, which took place at the Plaza de San Nicolás on Carnival Tuesday. Father Revollo recalled it as follows:

On Carnival Tuesday, all the danzas gathered in the same plaza, where they confronted each other in real fights trying to steal their flags: this is what was called the Conquista (conquest), even though it actually began

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22 Ibid, 8.
23 Revollo, 133.
on Sunday morning when the piratas, (forty or eighty men dressed in red with old chopos who constituted carnival’s police) went to the loma, today Barranquillita, to get the indios (natives) from the monte, who pretended to be captured as they were brought to the plaza.24

According to Alfonso Fontalvo, the Congos were the ones who participated in the Conquista. They were warriors by nature and they fought true combats to steal other Congos’ flags, their symbols of power and dominance. In some cases, the encounters were so violent that men were severely hurt or killed, which is one of the reasons the event was eventually prohibited.25

By the end of the nineteenth century most of the activities that characterized the “carnaval popular” were prohibited or modified. The Danza de los Piratas disappeared after their members were prohibited from using musical instruments from the military quarters, the salones burreros moved out from the center of the city and were relegated to the periphery, and the Vara Santa and the Conquista were abolished under the excuse of maintaining the city’s public order. Despite the fact that carnival was in essence a popular festivity, it was obvious that by the end of the century, some aspects of the celebration were already controlled and supervised by the city’s government.

The First Carnaval de Barranquilla of the Twentieth Century

At the turn of the twentieth century, Barranquilla had become a vibrant commercial port where businesses related to maritime and river transportation dominated. Eighty percent of Colombia’s foreign trade moved through the country’s Caribbean ports

24 Ibid, 132.

largely following the route of the Magdalena River. These ports had the basic function of serving as a liaison between foreign markets and the major centers of production and consumption of the Colombian Andes, and the double condition of maritime and river port put Barranquilla in a privileged position.

Travelers using river transportation to go to the interior of the country or on their way to overseas destinations were offered all the services needed including hotels and restaurants. Prosperous import/export businesses supported the city’s development as a financial center and naval workshops, shipyards, and warehouses served as the basis of the city’s nascent industrialization. U.S. Consul in Barranquilla, Elias Pellet, described the villa’s industrial development at the end of the nineteenth century as follows: “El Porvenir was joined by other soap manufacturing companies and La Industria, which produced oil, also functioned as a sawmill and a cotton packing company. Other industries produced shoes, shirts, ice and soft drinks. There were tanneries, print shops and bakeries.”

Industrial development brought not only financial prosperity to the city but also major social changes. At the turn of the twentieth century Barranquilla emerged as one of the first concentrated areas of urban workers in the country. Migrants arrived looking for employment and better opportunities. In addition to jobs, they needed housing and goods. The city grew at a very fast pace: in 1872 it had 18 calles (streets that run east-west), 13

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carreras (streets that run north-south), and 2,176 houses; and in 1896 it had 30 calles, 24 carreras, and 4,120, an 89.3% increase in only twenty four years.28

Economic prosperity stimulated the city’s urbanization. Like many modern European and American cities, by 1903 Barranquilla had streetcars, electricity, postal, telegraph, telephonic, and hospital services. With economic prosperity came also the consolidation of a local elite that mirrored European models in all aspects of life and the development of a middle class that benefited from financial success and upward mobility.

But the excitement of the city’s growth was tarnished by the civil war known as the Guerra de los Mil Días, a long and bloody confrontation between followers of Colombia’s two major political parties, the Liberal and the Conservador, which began in October 1899 and ended in November 1902.29 Barranquilla suffered not only political and economic consequences as a result of the civil war, but also the cancellation of all carnival celebrations for the duration of the war. In 1900, Barranquilla’s Mayor, Don Eustacio Barrios, issued a decree canceling the celebration of all official carnival events. According to oral testimonies, some dancers ignored the decree and celebrated on the streets, but no elite balls or popular public dances took place during those years.30

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29 During the second half of the nineteenth and most of the twentieth century, Colombia’s politics were dominated by two major parties, the Partido Conservador and the Partido Liberal. Although the consevadores tended to favor a centralized government and to support the Catholic Church, and the liberales were inclined towards federalism and the separation of Church and State, some scholars suggest than Colombia’s traditional political parties had a common objective: to serve as mechanisms designed by the elite to manipulate the lower classes. The ongoing confrontation for political power between the two led to several civil wars including the Guerra de los Mil Días, which began in 1899 as a result of the liberales’ discontent with a major economic crisis and their opposition to the government’s policies. David Bushnell, Colombia una nación a pesar de sí misma. Nuestra historia desde los tiempos precolombinos hasta hoy (Bogotá: Editorial Planeta, 2007), 141-143 and 216-219.

30 Ibid.
1903, Mayor Barrios issued a new decree reinstating the celebrations. Historian Alfredo De la Espriella describes this event as follows:

Since 1900, the traditional festivities of our picturesque Carnaval had not taken place as per a decree issued by the Mayor, the famous Eustacio Barrios. The custom, dating from more than forty years according to oral testimonies, congregated the people at the public plaza, the Calle Ancha first and later the Camellón Abello, to share three days of healthy and cordial rejoicing. Because of the sad circumstances of the Guerra de los Mil Días, the country was in mourning so it was not appropriate to enjoy the tradition while our brothers suffered and died in that absurd bipartisan struggle. (It would have not been appropriate that) the barranquilleros, always rising to their pacifist vocation, had enjoyed such joyful tradition ignoring a national tragedy.

Thanks to a new decree, announced by the same burgomaster, Mayor Barrios, who was serving a second term, the festivity and the rest of the mojigangas that took place in the two major parish districts -the Barrios de Abajo and Arriba del Río- were reinstated.31

De la Espriella’s comments indicate the festivities were reinstated in 1903 but also point out the continuity of the local government which reflects the war’s end result: the failed attempt of the liberales to take over the political power which at the national and the local levels remained in the hands of the conservadores. This situation explains an important aspect of the 1903 carnival celebrations, which was the lack of participation of the liberales who were prohibited from attending carnival events.

According to sociologist Edgar Rey Sinning, liberales were prohibited from going on the streets by local authorities from the winning Partido Conservador. For that reason, those festivities are remembered as the “Carnavales de Tinta Azul” (Blue Ink Carnivals).32 The conservadores disguised themselves and enjoyed the celebrations while the liberales watched from their balconies as their opponents celebrated at their leisure.33

31 De la Espriella, 2003, 10.
32 Traditionally, the Partido Conservador is represented in blue and the Partido Liberal in red.
Testimonies by Doña Toña Vengoechea de Silva and by Don Rodolfo Abello, cited by Guillermo Abadía Morales, further illustrate the way in which the first carnival of the twentieth century was celebrated:

After the Guerra de los Mil Días, in 1903, Barranquilla’s society rescued the lost tradition. Three years had passed since the *carnaval popular* and the celebrations at the elite’s centers (had taken place). It was customary to celebrate sumptuous elegant balls in the manner of the classic European ‘soirées’ at the *Municipal*, also known as the Teatro Emiliano. The *bando* was read in the same military quarters, in front of the beautiful little plaza, where in 1910 the statue of Christopher Columbus was installed. (…) The *pueblo* gathered at the Plaza de San Nicolás and at the Calle de Las Vacas, where from early morning on Sunday the *danzas* from the Barrio Arriba began to walk towards the city, to meet the *danzas* from the Barrio Abajo, coming from the Calle del Mercado, through the Callejones del Roble, la Luz, Aduana, and the old Callejón de Las Tusas.\(^3^4\)

Vengoechea and Abello recalled the reading of the edict which marked the beginning of the pre-carnival season, and the celebration of two distinct types of carnivals: the “*carnaval de élite*” and the “*carnaval popular or carnaval de pueblo,*” clearly differentiated not only by the spaces in which they took place— the plaza and the streets versus the private domain represented by the theatre— but also by the types of activities, such as upscale balls inspired by European celebrations versus *danzas* inspired by African, indigenous, and Spanish traditions.

The celebration of two types of carnival events based on class divisions, some exclusively for the members of the upper classes and some specifically for the members of the lower classes, was customary not only in Barranquilla but in most places where carnival was celebrated in the nineteenth century. As Nina S. de Friedemann notes, while

\(^3^3\) Rey Sinning, 2001, 36.

one of the characteristics of carnival in Europe, America, and even in Northern Africa, was to celebrate in the streets, it was also common for the upper or dominant class to distance itself by organizing private events in their homes or in salons, defining two polarized carnival expressions: the “carnaval del pueblo,” in the streets and plazas, and the “carnaval de las clases dominantes” (“carnaval de élite”), celebrated by those who had the political power and the economic means in closed and exclusive places. She also indicated that members of the elite could always cross over those limits by participating in popular celebrations, using a disguise or capuchón.35

Because of the presence of a prosperous bourgeoisie in Barranquilla, which at the end of the nineteenth century included a large number of merchants and entrepreneurs, Barranquilla had another social class that De la Espriella called de segunda. Members of this group were not included in the celebrations organized by the elite, so they planned their own festive gatherings in their homes and at the Salón Fraternidad.36

Friedemann suggested that the social stratification that characterized Barranquilla’s society at the beginning of the twentieth century was reminiscent of the one that existed in Cartagena during colonial times and the beginning of the República, which was determined by the color of skin pigmentation. This was clearly seen in the context of the festivities of San Sebastián and La Candelaria, through three distinctive dances organized for the occasion: The baile primero de blancas de Castilla, a ball for Spanish or criollo women of Spanish descent; the baile de segunda de las pardas o mezclas acaneladas de las razas primitivas, the dance for mestizas; and the baile tercero de las negras libres, for free women slaves.37

35 Friedemann, 23.
36 De la Espriella, 2003, 11.
37 Friedemann, 51.
Although Friedemann’s description of Cartagena’s social divisions as three
groups appears to be somehow similar to Barranquilla’s at the beginning of the twentieth
century, I believe Barranquilla’s was determined mainly, although not exclusively, by
economic and political power rather than by ethnic traits. La Arenosa’s upper class was
formed mainly by families who arrived in the nineteenth century from Santa Marta and
Cartagena bringing with them economic wealth and the prestige of their criollo ancestors.
Politically, they were faithful supporters of either the Conservative or the Liberal parties.
The bourgeoisie or as De la Espriella calls it, la clase segunda, was formed by merchants
and prosperous individuals involved in different commercial activities. The presence of
foreign immigrants in this group was significant although in some cases they chose to
remain socially and culturally united. The working class formed the third class that
included locals and migrants who, from an ethnic perspective, were identifiable as
indigenous people, mestizos, mulattos, and descendants of African slaves.38

Each of these three classes, the elite or clase primera, the bourgeoisie or clase
segunda, and the lower class or clase tercera or popular, was clearly defined in the
context of the carnival festivities of 1903 by the kind of events they participated in and
the spaces in which they celebrated. As was previously indicated, the elite celebrated in
the Teatro Municipal, the bourgeoisie at the Salón Fraternidad or in private homes, and
the lower class on the streets and the salones burreros. As noted by Friedemann,
members of the elite were allowed to participate at all three levels, but the popular classes
were only allowed in the spaces and events determined by the government for their
enjoyment of the celebrations. In other words, despite the fact that carnival is supposed to

38 Because Barranquilla’s popular class included mainly people of indigenous and/or African descent, one
may argue there was also discrimination based on race.
transgress certain norms and to eliminate discriminatory social divisions, that was not the case in the celebration of Barranquilla’s carnival at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The most prestigious event of the *carnaval de élite* was the exclusive Gran Baile de Fantasía (Grand Fantasy Ball) that took place on Sunday, 22 February, 1903. The ball, inspired by European celebrations and masquerades organized in Madrid, Paris and Venice, was a lavish production that included elaborate costumes and dancing. Although it was not possible to obtain a photograph of the 1903 ball, one taken just a few years later illustrates how members of the elite prepared for the occasion.

![Corte de Versailles, Carnaval de Barranquilla (1917)](image)

This *comparsa*, inspired by Louis XV French Royal Court of Versailles, featured the Carnival Presidents, their friends and relatives dressed in elegant costumes elaborated
with expensive imported fabrics and trims, including French lace and English linens.\textsuperscript{39} The costumes represented not only the availability of the finest materials and the high level of craftsmanship provided by local dressmakers, but most important, the financial success of the members of the elite who benefited from the prosperous economic development of the city. It also illustrates the “love affair” of such individuals with everything “European.” Since the Spanish conquest, the elite assumed that all that was good culturally including language, religion, government, law, literature, and fashion, originated in Europe and therefore that was the model to follow even in post-independence times.\textsuperscript{40} Since only club members belonging to the elite were allowed to attend the ball at the Club Barranquilla, members of the \textit{clase segunda} attended balls at the Salón Fraternidad and in private homes. These were also exclusive and required a personal invitation such as the one printed below.

\textsuperscript{39} Alfredo De la Espriella, interviewed by the author, Barranquilla, October, 2004.

\textsuperscript{40} Michael J. LaRosa and Germán Mejía, \textit{An Atlas and Survey of Latin American History} (Armonk and London: M.E. Sharpe, 2007), 8.
Moisés Navarro and Miguel Racedo invited Mr. Alfonzo Nuñez to two costume balls, one on Sunday and one on Monday, both at the home of Don Roque Pernett. Note the invitation was personal and non-transferable and no guests were allowed to bring additional company, making it a very exclusive event. According to De la Espriella, the people who attended these parties danced *contradanzas, pasillos, waltz, polkas and rigodones* and dressed in costumes inspired by Venetian, French, and Spanish characters, including Pierrot, Harlequin, jugglers, fairies, kings and queens. Their choices in musical rhythms and costumes illustrate Barranquilla’s elite’s admiration for European models at the turn of the twentieth century.

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41 Alfredo De la Espriella, interviewed by the author, Barranquilla, October, 2004.
A special event celebrated by the elite was the *asalto*, a combination of European *charivari* and *mumming* traditions. The *charivari* was a folk practice that originated in France in which groups of men went from house to house singing songs that criticized or made fun of those within, occasionally playing music or making noisy sounds with pots and pans. In response to their serenades, people threw buckets of water or ashes at the performers.42 In some areas of France and Germany, it was common to organize the *mumming*, folk theatrical representations performed in exchange for food and alcohol.43

According to De la Espriella, *asaltos* were celebrated in Barranquilla in the following manner:

The *asaltos*, a festive custom, was done by dancers, masked people and *capuchones*, who arrived in the homes of the *ricachones* (wealthy people) who welcomed these funny characters -*caporales de danzas*- and offered them *sancochos*, meats, alcoholic drinks, and sweets, in appreciation for showing up at their homes and honoring them by naming them *padrinos*, and giving them the machetes and the hats as a token of gratitude and sympathy.44

In addition to illustrating a rare instance in which members of the lower classes were welcomed in the private homes of the members of the elite, *asaltos* documented the relationships of *padrinazgo* common in post-colonial paternalistic societies. The host, a member of the elite, opened his home and welcomed the *carnavaleros* who thanked him for his hospitality by honoring him with the symbols of the dance, a machete or a hat. That did not mean that the *padrino* (godfather) became an active member of the *danza* or that he participated in any way in any of its activities. By opening his house to the


44 De la Espriella, 2003, 11.
members of the *danza*, the host acknowledged his support, which was not only economic, but also symbolic. The relationship with a member of the elite brought prestige to the *danza* while the host benefited from the dancers’ support at the political level.

It is important to mention that this kind of relationship between members of the elite and the lower classes is typical of post-colonial Latin America, particularly in areas where indigenous people and African slaves and their descendants were submitted to legal servitude. The abolition of slavery led to new kinds of relationships that stimulated a paternalistic attitude from the wealthy landlords towards the workers and, later, from the factory owners towards their employees. This relationship attained new levels in the twentieth century when the loyalty towards the *padrino* implied supporting him or his political party and the candidates of his choice. Therefore, the exchange that occurred during the *asaltos* was not just entertaining, but it served to support class divisions and social hierarchy in this particular context.

Prior to 1903, Barranquilla’s official Carnival season lasted three days, from Sunday to Tuesday, prior to Ash Wednesday. Members of the lower classes partied dressed in costumes, performed comedies that criticized social and political events, and went out to the streets to perform their *danzas*. Alfonso Fontalvo, director of the Danza El Torito Ribeño, founded in 1878, and *Rey Momo* of the 2005 Carnaval de Barranquilla recalls that the flag, symbol of the *danza*, was exhibited outside of the director’s dwelling and people gathered for several weeks to organize themselves prior to going out during carnival festivities. On carnival Sunday, rival groups went on the streets to meet with other *Congos*, to fight for territorial boundaries and to try to capture the other *danzas’* flags. In some cases, the encounters were bloody and deadly.
They were rivalries that existed between neighborhoods, among sectors or groups (...). When I took the command of the dance I worked towards ending those fights. (By then) there was nothing to fight about, it was all about rudeness, anyone would drink a bottle of rum, and seeing another dance pass by le mentaba la madre (he would call his mother a whore), the other one answered and started a perenguené (mess), then came another dance to respond and then came the trompada (punch)...  

Although Fontalvo’s testimony did not describe a specific situation that occurred in 1903, those kinds of encounters occurred on a yearly basis thus it is very possible that they also happened in that particular year.

Drinking liquor was, and still is, an important part of carnival’s celebration, and fights were common between rival Congo groups. Fontalvo explains that it is precisely because of the warrior nature of the dance that in the nineteenth century and throughout most of the twentieth century, children and women were not allowed to participate as members of the dance. That does not mean that women were not involved. In most cases they were in charge of sewing the costumes, which were very elaborate, of gathering the people, and cooking for their festive get-togethers. Young adults followed their fathers’ tradition and joined the danza as soon as they were allowed to do so.

Barranquilla’s First Batalla de Flores

As previously indicated, the 1903 pre-carnival season began with the Lectura del Bando (the reading of the edict) on 20 January. Starting that day, people began to plan, rehearse, organize the season’s activities, and celebrate pre-carnival parties and events.

45 Alfonso Fontalvo, interviewed by the author, October, 2004; interviewed by Kelly Escobar, 2005.
46 Ibid.
Because carnival had not been celebrated by the elite the previous three years, General Heriberto Vengoechea proposed to the Mayor Eustacio Barrios, to the Junta del Club Barranquilla, and to the presidents of that year’s carnival, Mr. Pedro Pérez and Ms. Beatriz Roncallo, to celebrate the end of the civil war with a Batalla de Flores (battle of flowers), as opposed to the battle of bullets that had taken place in the country during the previous years. The idea was approved and the event was put in place.

The Batalla de Flores took place on Saturday, 21 February 1903, at four o’clock in the afternoon at the Camellón Abello. According to De la Espriella, two factions integrated by members of the elite rode carriages decorated with natural flowers. One departed from the Plaza del Cuartel, located at the north end of the Camellón Abello, and the second from the Club Barranquilla, located at the southern end of the street. Immediately after the trumpets from the military quarters sounded, the two factions attacked each other with “artillery” made out of serpentines, confetti, fresh flowers and perfumed water. They ran at each other four times, encouraged by the spectators who gathered on the street. Following the “combat,” the groups “made peace” and joined a group of guests invited to celebrate at the Teatro Emiliano.

This description of the Batalla de Flores illustrates several aspects of what life was like in Barranquilla at the turn of the century. The event took place on the city’s main avenue, the Camellón Abello, where not only the government buildings and the military headquarters were located, but also the homes of the members of the upper class, as well as the Club Barranquilla and the Church of San Nicolás. As was customary in most Latin

47 Alfonso Fontalvo indicated that the danzas de Congo went on during those years. Interviewed by the author, Barranquilla, October, 2004.
American cities, the political, military, economic, and religious powers were concentrated in the city’s center.

Starting the event at the sound of the military trumpets was not only a reference to the end of the war, but also a way to legitimize the Batalla de Flores and make it a formal event. Since that day, all official carnival parades celebrated in Barranquilla have begun with the sound of sirens and/or with the presence of either the army or the police, for the same reasons.

Fig. 14. Photograph taken at the Camellón Abello, at four o’clock in the afternoon, on Saturday, February 21, 1903, from the southern end of the street, Edificio del Cuartel (military quarters’ building), from where the victorias that participated in the first Batalla de Flores departed (1903). Photographer unknown. Published in Alfredo De la Espriella, Carnaval de Barranquilla. Centenario de la Batalla de Flores 1903-2003. Álbum del Recuerdo. Barranquilla: Editorial Mejoras, 2003, 17.

A photograph taken on that day provides information about the event as well as details regarding life in the city at the turn of the twentieth century (Fig. 14). The majority of the public who gathered on the street were men dressed with long pants, long
sleeved jackets, and hats, and not with costumes, which shows that the first Batalla de Flores was not conceived as a carnival parade, but as a pre-carnival spectacle celebrated on carnival’s eve. The men’s attire reflects their taste in fashion, very much inspired by a European style. The presence of marines in uniform all dressed in white including their shoes, one on the lower left corner of the photograph and another one crossing towards the walkway, is an indication of Barranquilla’s importance as a river and maritime port.

Besides one child who appears on the lower left corner of the photograph and two black or mulatto women located a few feet in front of him, the crowd is composed of men. From a social perspective, this indicates that at the turn of the century in Barranquilla, as in most cities of Latin America, women and children were generally confined to their homes, particularly during the celebration of public events.

The photograph also provides important information regarding the city’s urban development, particularly when compared to the earlier picture of the Calle Ancha.


The photograph taken in 1880 shows Barranquilla’s houses were largely made out of mud and covered with thatched roofs. The towers of the Church of San Nicolás
dominated the landscape, which at the time included the two-story government headquarters building. The empty sandy street was covered with water puddles, most likely the remains of recent arroyos. Only six people with dark skin, including a few children, were out at the time the picture was taken.

Although only twenty-three years had passed between the two photographs, the city had experienced significant changes. Masonry buildings replaced the houses with hatched-roofs, suggesting not only a change in materials and architectural design, but also a change in demographics. As members of the upper classes chose to live in the center of town near their businesses, they moved into the modern constructions located on the city’s main avenue and benefited from living where the economic, social, and religious activities took place. The original inhabitants were relocated to other areas of the city, particularly to the surrounding neighborhoods of Barrio Arriba and Barrio Abajo.

The photograph taken in 1903 also illustrates the physical transformation that the original Calle Ancha underwent under the leadership of former Mayor Antonio Abello, in 1886. The newly redesigned avenue with its shaded areas adorned with trees and benches provided an accessible and pleasant open space for pedestrian traffic. Copying the style of famous boulevards from Paris and Madrid, its construction illustrated the elite’s desire to make Barranquilla a modern society.
The themes of the two carriages that participated in the Batalla de Flores illustrate this idea. One celebrated the fact that Barranquilla was the first Colombian city that
offered mail service, and the second reproduced a phonograph, one of many technologies imported at the beginning of the century that would have a strong impact in the city known for its love of music.

The photographs also reveal an interesting and surprising fact: the participation of women in a public spectacle. Although their presence seems to contradict an earlier point about women’s and children’s participation in public celebrations, it must be seen as a meaningful exception. One explanation may be that the Batalla de Flores was organized and performed by members of the elite. Since women of the upper class were highly involved in the city’s cultural activities, they could have had an impact on the decision of allowing young women to be part of the celebration. Another explanation may be that since women were generally featured in war-related celebrations as the symbols of victory, being that the Batalla de Flores was a celebration of the end of the Guerra de los Mil Días, their presence on the carriages was justified.

In Correo Nacional (Fig. 16), two unidentified young women are accompanied by an older man, and in El Fonógrafo (Fig. 17), the carnival’s Vice-President, Ms. Nelly Siefken, is accompanied by the carnival’s President, Mr. Pedro Pérez. Even though these women were escorted by men, it was quite unusual for women of the elite to participate in a public event in most Colombian cities at the time, which shows the relative openness of Barranquilla’s society in regards to females, at least in this particular circumstance.

It is also important to mention that the coachman of the carriage El Fonógrafo has dark skin and does not wear shoes. His job, his African background, and the lack of footwear, suggest he belongs to a different social class than the people riding in the
carriage. The scene documents the class, and some scholars may add racial divisions, that were in place in Barranquilla’s society at the beginning of the twentieth century.

In terms of the carnival’s organization, the first Batalla de Flores had a long lasting impact. It was so successful among the members of the elite that it was reenacted the following year and was subsequently included as a permanent event in the Carnaval de Barranquilla, extending official celebrations to four days, beginning on Saturday and ending on Tuesday.

The event also transformed spatial boundaries. Since the beginning of the celebration of carnival festivities in Barranquilla, streets and plazas had served as scenarios for what was known as the *carnaval popular*, the one celebrated by the *pueblo* (the lower class). The upper class had celebrated it in private settings, maintaining clearly defined spatial and social limits between the two groups. With the celebration of the Batalla de Flores in 1903, spatial limits were drastically modified. Not only were members of the elite featured in a public event but also and more importantly, they used the city’s main street to stage their own pre-carnival spectacle.

The event also set a precedent for using the city’s main street, the Camellón Abello, as the stage for the Batalla de Flores. Throughout the twentieth century, many official pre-carnival and carnival celebrations including the Batalla de Flores were staged on that street, which was later renamed Paseo de Bolívar.

Another legacy of the first Batalla de Flores was the use of vehicles. The carriages or *victories* of 1903 can be considered the predecessors of the floats featured in contemporary carnival parades. It is important to note that the use of flowers to decorate the carriages not only corresponds to a European tradition but also to a Colombian
custom. The country’s tropical flora has traditionally been featured in popular celebrations in all sorts of ways, including floats, costumes, hairdos, and other paraphernalia related to local and national festivities.

It is important to acknowledge the role played by festive events including carnival in the formation of regional and national identities. According to Carlos De Oro, Colombian identity must be perceived as a contrast between an official vision, promoted by the state or the dominant ideologies, and a non-official vision promoted by the popular classes.48 In the past, the official ideology of “national unity” exalted carnival’s popular expressions and traditions as being part of the country’s rich “mestizaje.” After the constitution of 1991 declared Colombia a “multi-cultural” and “multi-ethnic” nation, the official discourse has focused on the participation of the different cultural and ethnic groups in the construction of the new national representation. The need to control the official version of the local identity may be seen as one of the reasons why the elite took over the planning of Barranquilla’s “carnaval popular” at the turn of the twentieth century.

As previously mentioned, with the celebration of the first Batalla de Flores the elite took over the planning of events organized for the enjoyment of the general public. A new type of carnival was born, one that was organized and controlled by the elite for the pleasure of all. From a sociological, economical, and political perspective, the first Batalla de Flores set the precedent for the transition from carnaval popular to carnaval espectáculo that would occur throughout the twentieth century.

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Due to the success of the 1903 Batalla de Flores, General Vengoechea issued a new decree in 1904, inviting the *barranquilleros* to dress up and dance during carnival times. He nominated himself as Carnival President and appointed an organizing committee that included the following members of the elite: Rosario Martínez, President, and Eduardo Martínez Aycardi and Ana Isabel López, Vice-Presidents. As was customary, he also appointed “ministers” and “ambassadors.” Upon receiving the news of these seemingly political appointments, Colombia’s President José Manuel Marroquín, unaware of this particular custom and still upset after Panama’s independence, sent an emissary to clarify the situation. He was relieved when he was informed that what was happening in Barranquilla was not a movement towards independence, but the celebration of a carnival tradition.49

Conclusions

The carnival celebrations of 1903 were well received by the *barranquilleros* who were happy to leave behind the difficulties experienced during the civil war that ended in November 1902. Despite the fact that the supporters of the Liberal party were excluded from some of the events, the population responded with joy and excitement as they celebrated the first carnival of the twentieth century.

In addition to recovering a popular tradition, the festivities introduced some novelties that not only enriched the celebration but also reflected the changes Barranquilla was undergoing at the time. The organization of different events in private and public spaces throughout the city according to specific social classes illustrated the development of a new type of society shaped by the economic impact of industrialization.

49 Rey Sinning, 2001, 37.
Although Barranquilla did not inherit a tight social division from colonial times, three social classes emerged based on the financial success of the individuals in the city’s evolving capitalistic economy: the elite or “primera clase,” formed by individuals involved with transportation and commerce; the bourgeoisie or “segunda clase,” which included shopkeepers, storekeepers, and workshop owners; and the pueblo or “tercera clase,” which included farmers, artisans, and more important, workers, who provided much-needed manpower for the growing local industry.50

Demographically, the city continued to grow with the arrival of migrants from the Caribbean region, particularly from the cities of Santa Marta and Cartagena, and by residents of towns on the banks of the Magdalena River, who were joined by foreigners from the Caribbean, the United States, and Europe. While a group of wealthy families from Barranquilla, Santa Marta, and Cartagena formed the city’s upper class, merchants and professionals were joined by a successful group of foreigners to form the nascent middle class. Migrants from the riverbanks of the Magdalena River, most of them with African and/or indigenous roots, formed the core of Barranquilla’s clases populares. The division of the city’s social structure was clearly illustrated in the way carnival events were organized.

A major change that occurred in 1903 was the appropriation of the public celebration by the members of the elite. By organizing the first Batalla de Flores at the Camellón Abello and making it a yearly event, the elite took over the control of the public aspect of carnival festivities. The elite continued to celebrate in private spaces (clubs and homes) and the lower classes in the public spaces (streets, plazas, and salones

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burreros), but they no longer controlled them. Beginning in 1903, the elite had the power to organize and determine the way the popular carnival would be celebrated.

The use of public spaces during the 1903 carnival celebrations and the photographs that document them provide a valuable testimony of the urbanization of the city at the turn of the twentieth century. In addition to showing the construction of boulevards and buildings modeled after European cosmopolitan cities, they illustrate the importance of streets and plazas in the city’s daily life. Barranquilla’s “openness” to socialization and interaction was supported by the public spaces that were planned as the city continued to grow. The urbanization of the city also reflected the economic prosperity of the port, which would become the capital of the new Departamento del Atlántico, in 1905.
CHAPTER THREE

CARNIVAL DE BARRANQUILLA, 1942

Historical Context

At the turn of the twentieth century, Barranquilla was a prosperous town under the jurisdiction of Cartagena de Indias, the capital of the Partido de Tierradentro. Thanks to its economic development as a river and maritime port, Barranquilla became the capital of the newly created Departamento del Atlántico, established by the Ley 21 del 14 de Julio of the Asamblea Nacional Constituyente, in 1910.\(^1\) With its new political status, the city housed the departmental administration and served as the seat of the municipal government, led by the mayor, the city council, and the municipal judge. According to the Título XVIII of Colombia’s 1886 Constitution, the mayor exercised the function of governor’s agent and the governor could appoint, reform, and/or revoke all of the mayor’s acts.\(^2\) This is an important fact to keep in mind when analyzing the organization of Barranquilla’s carnival festivities throughout the twentieth-century.

During the 1920s, La Arenosa became a cosmopolitan city with a significant level of industrialization. After the partial opening of Bocas de Ceniza allowed ships coming from overseas to dock on the city’s river port, Barranquilla offered better opportunities and living conditions than most towns and cities of Colombia’s northern coast. In addition to providing jobs in the growing industrial sector, the city offered a modern infrastructure. Between 1940 and 1942, Governor Joaquín Ramón Lafaurie initiated


major improvements in the areas of public health and education, including the pavement of several inter-municipal roads, the building of bridges, the construction of public schools, the creation of the Universidad del Atlántico’s engineering faculty, and the opening of the maternity wing of the Hospital de la Caridad. These programs, together with the city’s industrial and commercial development, made it the preferred destination for migrants from the Departamentos of Magdalena, Bolívar, and Antioquia. In a little more than three decades, the city’s population had grown from 40,115 (1905) to 152,348 (1938), making it the third largest urban center in the country.

Barranquilla also attracted foreign immigrants from Europe, the United States, the Caribbean, and the Near East. One of the most influential groups was the Colonia Alemana, whose members began to arrive in the late nineteenth century. Many of them married local women and left a strong imprint on the city’s social web. In 1904, German immigrants founded the Club Alemán where Colombian and German festivities, including carnival balls, were celebrated. Historian Alfredo De la Espriella suggested that the Club Alemán’s elegant carnival balls were particularly influential in the development of Barranquilla’s “carnaval de élite.”

Since Barranquilla’s economic development depended greatly on the international markets, its government watched very closely Colombia’s international relations. In 1939, when World War II began and President Eduardo Santos declared the country’s

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5 It is common in Barranquilla to call a group of people of a particular nationality or religion and/or their descendants a *colonia* (colony).

neutrality, the local community supported his position. This is not surprising considering the city benefited significantly from German immigrants’ entrepreneurial activities, including the establishment of Latin America’s first aviation company, the Sociedad Colombo-Alemana de Transportes Aéreos (Scadta), founded in Barranquilla, in 1919.

Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the United States urged President Santos to repress and pursue individuals with ties to German and Italian interests in Colombia. The “black list” included important Colombian politicians and entrepreneurs such as Laureano Gómez, founder of El Siglo and future president (1950-1951), who led meetings of the Fascist Black Shirts in the newspaper’s offices in Bogota. By February 1942 Colombia had broken diplomatic ties with the Axis Powers. German, Italian, and Japanese citizens who wished to remain in Colombia were relocated to the towns of Fusagasugá and Villeta, near the country’s capital, Bogotá. In Barranquilla, the Club Alemán, which hosted meetings of the supporters of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (Nazi Party), was closed. The aviation company Scadta was forced to dismiss its German employees and eventually transferred its assets and routes to a new entity, Avianca, which was established as a Colombian corporation owned by local investors.

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7 Ibid, 29.


9 Bushnell, 279.
Despite the fact that World War II was taking place and that the city was feeling the social, economic, and political effects of the international conflict, plans to organize carnival began in December 1941.

Carnaval de Barranquilla 1942: Organizational Changes

Almost four decades after the century’s first carnival (1903), the demographic growth of the city and, most importantly, its modernization, called for a carefully planned program led no longer by the leaders of the social clubs, but by the local government. Barranquilla’s elite took over the carnival’s organization in the same manner European societies had done in the nineteenth century during the times of the industrial revolution.

Curator Barbara Mauldin described the European carnival’s transition as follows:

With the development of a new class structure and the blossoming of the bourgeoisie, the Carnivals that had survived began to be organized differently and took on new meanings. The emerging middle class saw Carnivals as civic events that helped mold the identity of their cities and towns. Carnival balls and parties were now open to a larger segment of the population, and the street parades became more organized. Groups from different neighborhoods or workers’ leagues competed with one another for the best performances, costumes, dancing, and music.10

In Barranquilla, the development of a new class structure and the presence of an influential bourgeoisie during the first decades of the twentieth century also led to the development of carnival as a civic event. As the population grew, parades and popular salones became more organized and more profitable, which is why, when planning the 1942 festivities, the government decided to take over the role previously played by the leaders of the private clubs as coordinator of carnival’s public events.

10 Mauldin, 5.
In 1941, the Departamento del Atlántico’s Governor Joaquín Ramón Lafaurie created the official Junta Organizadora del Carnaval (Carnival Organizing Board), as part of a civic program led by the local government and the Oficina de Turismo y Carnaval (Carnaval and Visitor’s Bureau), with the support of the Sociedad de Mejoras Públicas (Public Improvement Society). Through the Honorary Assembly’s Ordenanza No. 37, 1941, the new Board was created with the purpose of establishing an entity in charge of organizing and overseeing all official carnival events. The new Junta Organizadora del Carnaval was formed by the Secretary of Education of the Departamento del Atlántico, Mr. Enrique Blanco, President; Mr. José Domingo Pumarejo, Treasurer; Mr. Rafael

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Salcedo Villareal, Secretary; Captain Alfredo Dávila, Consultant; Mr. Luis Ricardo Fuenmayor, representing the Sociedad de Mejoras Públicas; Mr. Enrique Fuenmayor Glen, representing the popular classes; and Mr. José A. (Pepillo) Blanco, representing the centros sociales (private clubs).\(^\text{12}\)

Some of the nominations and the jobs given to the individuals who served on the Board played an important role in the context of the carnival’s modernization process. According to De la Espriella, Don Enrique Fuenmayor was “a distinguished member of Barranquilla’s society” chosen to serve as liason between the Board and the clases populares, “people who lived in the barrios de clase baja, like Rebolo or Las Nieves.”\(^\text{13}\) More than representing the popular classes as a whole Mr. Enrique Fuenmayor acted as a link between the Board and the leaders of the popular neighborhoods. His main role was to ensure that the organization of the official carnival events that were to take place in the barrios would be organized according to the Board’s vision and plans.

Due to the continuous growth of the popular classes, the government saw the need to control their carnival celebrations to promote “order and progress.” It is not surprising that Captain Alfredo Dávila, the highest representative of Colombia’s Armed Forces in Barranquilla, had been appointed to the Board, since the military had been in charge of maintaining order at all official carnival events since the staging of the first Batalla de Flores in 1903. As the city grew and more people participated in the celebration, the government counted on the local police and the armed forces to maintain the order at the festivities and to prevent crime.

\(^{12}\) Alfredo De La Espriella, interviewed by the author, January, 2008.

\(^{13}\) Ibid.
Mr. José A. (Pepillo) Blanco represented the other end of the spectrum, the private clubs, which, since the nineteenth century, had organized carnival balls reserved exclusively for the members of the local elite. By being involved with the planning of the upper class’ events and monitoring the celebrations of the popular classes, the Board was able to oversee both private and public events.

According to the minutes of the Board’s first meeting, which took place on Tuesday, 13 January 1942, at the local government’s offices, the Board determined that the main objectives of the carnival celebrations of 1942 were to attract tourism and to support popular culture:

The Junta Organizadora del Carnaval, created by the governorship of the departamento in compliance with provisions of the Asamblea del Atlántico that declared Carnival’s season as conducive to the attraction of tourism and to elevate the artistic sense of the people in the presentation of their traditional dances and costumes, has been working with much enthusiasm and activity in the organization of the celebrations that this year will be of great splendor and animation with the election of the Queen of the Carnival and the countless social and popular acts that will be take place during the carnival season.14

The first objective of the Board was to promote carnival as a tourist destination, to attract visitors who would be willing to spend money on lodging, entertainment, food, and liquor consumption, thus benefiting the local economy. This initiative corresponds to what García Canclini describes as one of carnival’s modern functions.15

With that goal in mind, the Board developed an advertising campaign that promoted the Carnaval de Barranquilla nationally and internationally. Captain Alfredo Dávila, who was also the President of the Tourism Committee of the Sociedad de

15 García Canclini, 19-25.
Mejoras Públicas at the time, coordinated a promotional campaign with the support of Avianca airlines, the Naviera (shipping company), and Barranquilla’s main hotels. The active participation of these corporations in the Board’s marketing strategy had a clear economic motivation, since they all benefited financially from the promotion of carnival as a tourist destination.

Additional advertising was contracted through local and national newspapers (El Tiempo, Bogotá; El Siglo, Bogotá; El Liberal, Bogotá; La Prensa, Barranquilla; and El Heraldo, Barranquilla), magazines (Revista Estampa, Bogotá; Revista Mejoras, Barranquilla; and Revista Civilización, Barranquilla), and local and national radio stations (Emisoras Voz de Bogotá, Voz de Colombia, Voz de Antioquia, Radio Manizales, La Voz del Valle, and Radio Santander) promoting carnival in the largest Colombian cities where, by the beginning of the 1940s, the majority of the country’s population was concentrated.

According to an article published in El Heraldo, the campaign was very successful:

In a recent report given to the Board by Mr. Carlos Escallón, chief of the traffic department of Aerovías Nacionales de Colombia (Avianca), he informs that the artistic posters decorated with typical motifs of Barranquilla’s traditional dances were distributed to all the agencies throughout the country. The results of this colorful campaign are beginning to show with the arrival of travelers attracted by the curiosity of knowing how the people of Barranquilla celebrate. The main hotels are beginning to be occupied by tourists.

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18 García Canclini, 81.

In addition to promoting carnival as a tourist destination, the Board recognized the importance of carnival’s traditional functions, such as providing jobs and entertainment for the popular classes, a provision that became even more explicit with the passing of time. With that in mind, the Board appointed Mr. Celio Villalba, Mr. José Manuel De la Rosa, Mr. Enrique Bernal Moreno, Mrs. Amira de la Rosa, and Mrs. Carmen Freund, as coordinators and directors of the three major official public events: the Carnival Queen’s Crowning Ceremony, the Batalla de Flores, and the Dances and Costumes’ Contest.20

Like all members of the Board, these individuals were “prestigious members of the city’s elite, whose interests,” according to De la Espriella, “were none other than civility.”21

Barranquilla had a long tradition of *civismo* (public spirit) and many members of the elite had worked voluntarily over the years to provide the popular classes with the opportunity to celebrate and enjoy the festivities. Some scholars, including anthropologist Nina de Friedemann, believe that this civic spirit masked over the years the elite’s manipulation of the popular traditions for political, social, and economic purposes.

Executive members of the industrial and commercial bourgeoisie are aware that although the neighborhoods are facing daily problems of survival, its inhabitants are important parts of the workforce and the electorate, while constituting potential forces of disturbance and disorder. The significance of this for the class that in Barranquilla controls power seems to have influenced the tactics they have been taken with carnival.22

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20 The participation of women in carnival’s organization, which, from the elite’s perspective, began with the election of Mrs. Julita Pinochet as coordinator of events and President of the Carnival in 1899, merits to be studied in greater detail. To date, the Carnaval de Barranquilla has not been studied from a gender perspective with the exception of Catalina Ruiz-Navarro, “En el Carnaval se crea a la medida,” en *Carnaval de Barranquilla. La fiesta sin fin*. Barranquilla: Fundación Carnaval de Barranquilla, 2011, 188-203.


Although Friedemann’s comments refer to a later date (1977), the roots of the issue go back precisely to 1942 when, for the first time, the local government saw the need to manage carnival’s public events in order to gain control of the lower classes. A clear example was the fact that the new Junta Organizadora del Carnaval took over the organization of the salones populares, temporary spaces strategically located in popular neighborhoods that provided entertainment and temporary jobs to their residents and those of the surrounding areas.

According to the Board’s minutes dated January 13, 1942, the organization of these salones populares was planned as follows:

Four salones will be built in different areas of the city: Barrio de San Roque-Rebolo, Barrio de San Isidro, Barrio de San Francisco, and Plaza de la Nevada. All the residents of the towns of the east road such as Soledad, Malambo, Sabanalarga, Santo Tomás, Palmar, and Ponedera, will be specially invited to the Salón-Club del Barrio San Roque-Rebolo. All the embassies of Galapa, Baranoa, Usiacurí, Sabanalarga, and all the other towns of the road La Cordialidad, will be invited to San Isidro’s. The dances and comedies from Siape, Playa Salgar, and Puerto Colombia will be presented first at the Barrio San Francisco.²³

The choice of the location of the different salones populares took into consideration the city’s urban growth. Each one was specifically located to attract not only the residents of Barranquilla’s popular neighborhoods in which they were established, but also the residents of nearby towns, showing that by 1942 the allure of the Carnaval de Barranquilla reached people beyond the city’s limits.

It is interesting to note how the members of the Board used expressions such as “salón-club” or “embassies” to describe the salones populares in a more formal or “upscale” way, while their intention remained to keep well defined spaces for each

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group’s celebrations. These linguistic expressions were meant to encourage the participation of the popular classes in public carnival activities that were now coordinated and controlled by the Board. The 1942 salones were clearly designed to segregate and to gather the carnavaleros of the lower classes in specific areas of the city and to have better control of their actions, which during carnival times tended to be “out of order.”

The Board’s minutes also indicated that the salones were meant to serve as meeting points for the danzas and comparsas organized in each of the barrios.24 Traditionally each danza met at the director’s home and performed on the streets, joining other danzas in public places such as callejones or plazas. By inviting carnival groups to perform at the salones the Board found a way to control the popular classes’ cultural expressions. Within the confined and supervised limits of the salones, members of the danzas were obliged to “perform” rather than “fight” other danzas for superiority or territorial control. Such performances also deprived the dances of most of the spontaneity and freedom that characterize their participation in street celebrations.

Members of the Board and its sub-committees visited the salones during rehearsals and chose the individuals authorized to collect cash for ticket, food, and liquor sales. According to the Board’s minutes, this was done “to avoid nuisances and fraud.”25 By keeping control of the finances of the salones populares, one of the most profitable businesses during carnival’s festivities, members of the Board showed not only their interest in controlling the economic aspect of the popular celebration, but also their lack of trust and their paternalistic attitude towards the lower classes. In fact, throughout the

24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
history of the Carnaval de Barranquilla, the control and management of funds has been a complicated issue. Unfortunately, there are no records documenting what was done with the money that was collected or who benefited from the income. Those funds were not included in the Board’s final report, which otherwise showed a detailed balance of the carnival’s finances.26

Another strategy implemented by the Board to benefit the popular classes and co-opt them at the same time, was the assignment of anticipos (cash advances) of $30 pesos given to five of the main traditional danzas registered with the Board’s secretary, in order to help them with their expenses.27 These funds, which were gratefully received by the directors of the danzas, exemplify not only the relationships of patronage that existed between the elite and the popular classes, but also the complex webs of social relations that began to develop between carnival participants and political figures.

Carnival Queen

The first official event of the 1942 Carnaval de Barranquilla was the crowning of the queen. The idea of a monarch personifying the festival as king or queen of carnival is a common characteristic of Caribbean and South American carnivals that can be traced to the European origins of the celebration, more specifically to Renaissance times. According to historians Martine Grinberg and Samuel Kinser, the image of a king


27 El Heraldo, enero 20, 1942, 9.
representing or personifying the festival existed in European literature in the thirteenth century, but only began to appear in carnival parades in the early sixteenth century.”28

In Barranquilla, the first carnival king, Don José Enrique De la Rosa “El Pobre,” was appointed in 1881.29 By the end of the nineteenth century, another figure emerged with the celebration of the “carnaval de élite” in the private clubs: the carnival’s president. In 1899, the board of directors of the Club Barranquilla chose a woman, Julita Pinochet de Obregón, to preside and coordinate the elite’s celebrations, including the fantasy ball that took place on carnival Sunday.

For several years, male and female presidents were chosen to lead the elite celebrations that took place at the private clubs, until 1918, when the title changed and the first carnival queen was elected.

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29 De la Espriella, 2003, 15.
The first queen of the Carnaval de Barranquilla, Alicia Lafaurie Roncallo, was the daughter of a prestigious member of the local elite (most likely a relative of Governor Joaquín Ramón Lafaurie), chosen to symbolically lead the celebrations of the Club Barranquilla. This was a common practice in other cities at the time including New Orleans where, as Kinser indicated, “by the early twentieth century a system of circulating the imaginary honors of royalty among young women of the best families by
displaying the debutantes of a given year in the courts of the carnival had emerged (...).
Connecting fun and games of carnival to the more serious business of showing off eligible young women to the right people was not the intention but the result of the gradual elaboration of the carnival societies’ rituals.\(^{30}\) Since Barranquilla’s elite was informed of the way carnival was celebrated in other countries, it is not surprising they would adopt this new tradition in 1918.

A portrait of Miss Lafaurie shows her seated on a throne, dressed with an elegant gown and crowned with the regalia inspired by the traditional European monarchies, including the coronation mantle, the scepter, and the crown (Fig. 19). In another picture, not included in this document, she is shown surrounded by young members of the Club Barranquilla wearing the same regalia and one foot resting on a pillow.\(^{31}\) The reference to monarchical symbols is typical of Latin American societies that despite being politically independent, continued to view Europe as a model for fashion and modernization. The fact that a woman was chosen as a symbolic leader in a male dominated society was also consistent with the tradition of inverting roles during carnival times.

During the years that followed the end of World War I, women continued to be appointed as symbolic leaders of the elite’s celebration, not as queens but as “Carnival Sultan,” Dilia Baena Lavalle (1919), and “President,” Paulina Sojo, (1920).\(^{32}\) A few years after the end of World War I, the second Carnival Queen, Toña Vengoechea, was elected (1923).\(^{33}\) Carnival Queens were chosen on and off during the 1920s and 1930s to

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\(^{30}\) Kinser, 121-122.

\(^{31}\) De la Espriella, 2003, 32.

\(^{32}\) Ibid, 35-36.

\(^{33}\) Ibid, 41.
lead the elite’s celebrations, including Isabel Elvira Sojo (1924), Rebeca Donado (1927), Josefina Vives (1928), Alicia Falquez (1935), and Josefina Osio. 34 No specific reason has been given for the fact that from 1937 to 1941 no queens were chosen, but possibly it had to do with the international political tensions that had led to World War II.

In 1941, the Junta Organizadora del Carnaval reinstated the Carnival Queen and gave her the honor to lead the events that took place at the private clubs and to act as the official Carnival Queen at all popular events. As per the Board’s initiative, the queen was not to be chosen among the single ladies of the Club Barranquilla, as it was customary, but rather “elected democratically” among the representatives of the different private clubs. The idea of electing rather than appointing the Carnival Queen followed the elite class ideal of becoming a modern society. The election was a symbolic move as only young girls of the city’s elite could be chosen. Indeed, the first institution to announce its candidate was the Club Barranquilla. A photograph of the building that housed it at the time illustrates not only the financial wealth of Barranquilla’s elite, but also its desire to follow European and North American trends, in this case exemplified by a beautiful structure inspired by Neo-Classical architecture (Fig. 20). In the end, the election did not take place, since no girl dared to run against the candidate representing the Club Barranquilla who was the daughter of a powerful businessman.

34 Ibid, 43, 47, 48, 57 and 58.
An article in the local newspaper El Heraldo informed the public that Miss Lolita Obregon’s nomination had been announced during a lavish ball organized in her honor on January 10, 1942.

On Saturday’s grand ball, the candidature was proclaimed and received with extraordinary enthusiasm. (...) Two orchestras played at the party, Emisora Atlántico Jazz Band and Kandela. People danced animatedly from ten PM until dawn. Young couples, couples of gentlemen and ladies, couples everywhere, wearing beautiful fantasy costumes and traditional formal attires (...) At the peak of the excitement of the Carnival celebration, the leadership and the members of the Club, together with the guests and the numerous ‘vassals’ launched the candidature of the Club’s

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35 Don José Víctor Dugand originally commissioned the building for the Club ABC. It was later acquired to house the Club Barranquilla, when the two clubs merged. The building was identified as the Club ABC in De la Espriella, (2003), 38, and as the Club Barranquilla in Consuegra Bolívar, 156.
Queen for the Carnival festivities (...) Doña Lolita Obregón was the lady chosen to carry in her hands the scepter of the Club Barranquilla.36

In addition to announcing the nomination of Lolita Obregón as the representative of the Club Barranquilla, the note illustrates some of the characteristics of the elite’s balls, including the performance of live music provided by local bands. The Emisora Atlántico Jazz Band was the official group of the local radio station Emisora Atlántico, founded in 1939. Radio played an important role in the lives of the barranquilleros at the time. Since programs were aired live, it was common for radio stations to have their own bands. The Emisora Atlántico Jazz Band, originally directed by Guido Perla, was the most popular one at the time.

The note also indicated that guests wore costumes or formal attire, which indicated the formality of the balls that took place in the city’s private clubs. Another interesting fact was the duration of these events. According to the article, people danced from late in the evening (10 PM) until dawn, showing the festive character of the barranquilleros.

Elite carnival balls played an important role in the process of social cohesion. These lavish celebrations favored the social interaction among adult members of the city’s upper class who shared fashions, trends, and customs, as they partied for long hours in their private and exclusive clubs. Carnival balls reinforced the sense of community and gave the opportunity to new members who were successful in their efforts to attain social mobility, to feel welcomed and accepted. By 1942, the city had not only a strong upper class represented by the members of the Club Barranquilla, but

also a significant representation of the bourgeoisie among the members of other private clubs including the Country Club, the Club Riomar and the Club Atlántico.

On January 14, 1942, the president of the carnival festivities of the Club Barranquilla legally registered Miss Lolita Obregón as candidate for the title of Carnival Queen. In the letter he presented to the Junta Organizadora del Carnaval he also informed that the Club Barranquilla would host a ball on January 31 of that year, in honor of the young girl who was elected. The following day, an unsigned article in El Heraldo stated that all private clubs, including the Country Club, the Club Riomar and the Club Atlántico, supported the nomination of Miss Lolita Obregón. According to historian Milton A. Zambrano Pérez, she was the granddaughter of Evaristo Obregón, (…) a prestigious businessman from Santa Marta who arrived in Barranquilla in the 1860s. Besides being the president of the board of the Banco de Barranquilla (1887), Mr. Obregón invested in agriculture and transportation, prior to promoting the Empresa de Energía Eléctrica de Barranquilla and establishing the Fábrica de Tejidos Obregón. He married Isabel Arjona, from Santa Marta, and had eight sons and one daughter, who inherited a significant patrimony and followed their father’s steps. They continued to invest in the development of the city, including the construction of the Hotel del Prado. Rafael, one of Evaristo’s sons, was Miss Lolita Obregón’s father.


Fig. 21. Miss Lolita Obregon, Carnival Queen, seating in the middle, surrounded by her princesses Miss Alicia Galofre and Regina Vives. Standing, from left to right, Miss Adelina Munarriz, Miss Maria Del Carmen Posada, Miss Jackeline Smith, Miss Margot Manotas, and Miss Conchita Blanco Carbonell. Photo by Scopell. La Prensa, January, 1942.

Coming from such a prestigious and financially powerful family, it is not surprising that no other girl dared to challenge her. She was not only the heir of an influential family, but she was also beautiful and charming. In a photograph printed in La Prensa on 28 January, 1942, she appears surrounded by her court, seven of the eight princesses chosen among the young eligible maidens of Barranquilla’s elite. All of them wear casual everyday dresses (no pants) and hairdos in the latest American and European fashion. Judging by their facial expressions, Miss Obregon certainly appears happy and the most comfortable in front of the camera (Fig. 21).
The image contrasts with a photograph taken during the crowning ceremony in which Miss Obregón is depicted dressed in full monarchical regalia wearing an elaborate gown reminiscent of seventeenth century European fashion, with a tight bodice and an ample skirt shaped by a petticoat, a traditional crowning coat with an opulent royal long train, a crown, and a scepter (Fig. 22). She is standing on a stage, surrounded by two of her princesses and three pageboys also dressed in the French monarchical court fashion. The scene illustrates the elite’s desire to reproduce as close as possible a traditional old-fashioned European/French monarchical crowning ceremony. There is a romantic aspect to it, but also a need on the part of the elite, to represent the highest level of sophistication and “high culture” inspired by European models.
Fig. 22. Lolita I, Carnival Queen, surrounded by her royal court, January 31, 1942. Photo by Velasco. La Prensa, January, 1942.

The crowning ceremony took place on 31 January, at nine o’clock in the evening, at the Apolo Theater. The program began with an overture performed by the Orquesta Caballería Ligera, followed by the entry of the queen and her eight princesses (each club
was represented by two young women) and her crowning as “Lolita I,” by the President of the Club Barranquilla, Don Joaquín Roca Niz. After the intermission, the program continued with poetry reading and dancing performed by women of the elite class, as inspired by European culture. The ceremony ended with the Carnival Queen and her princesses walking down the theatre’s aisle to the tune of a processional march.  

Fig. 23. Ladies from the royal court, Carmiña Navarro, Josefina Manotas, Tita Salvat, Betty Pocaterra, Carmen Alicia Sojo, Olga Zeppenfeldt, Gloria González, Florita Vives and Nohra González Rubio, are shown dancing a minuet in honor of the Carnival Queen, Lolita Obregón, during the crowning ceremony, January 31, 1942. Photo by Velasco. La Prensa, January, 1942.

This photograph of the Queen and her court was taken during the second act of the coronation program. The young ladies, wearing elegant white gowns inspired by old European fashion styles, performed for the public while Miss Obregón watched them

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from an elevated throne located in the background. The color white, chosen for the
dresses, symbolizes the “purity” of the young ladies. The stage is decorated with fresh
flowers in a feminine and garden-like way. As indicated in the photo’s credit and the
official program, the ladies danced a Minuet, a seventeenth century French dance
reminiscent of European monarchies (Fig. 23).

Although, judging from the formality of the program, the crowning ceremony
seemed to have been conceived as an exclusive event for the members of the elite, the
Board organized it as a public act to be attended by both the upper and the popular
classes. Anyone who wished to attend could do so by purchasing tickets in advance at the
following prices: box of six seats, $9.00 pesos; orchestra (assigned seating), $1.50 pesos;
orchestra (general seating), $1.00 peso; balcony, 60 cents; and upper balcony, 30 cents.⁴⁰

Compared to the prices of liquor at the time -a liter of local Ron Blanco, for example,
cost $1.74 pesos and the anisado dulce $1.95 pesos-⁴¹ ticket prices were indeed
affordable. But the fact that people could buy tickets and attend the ceremony did not
necessarily make it an event “for all.” On the one hand, the theater had limited capacity,
which meant that even if some members of the popular classes were able to attend, the
majority was left out. On the other hand, with the cost of living on the rise not everyone
could spend even a moderate amount of money on this kind of leisure activity.⁴²

Despite the fact that only a small group of people from the popular classes
attended and that members of the elite had better seats in the theater, by holding the

⁴⁰ El Heraldo, Enero 31, 1942, 9
⁴¹ Revista Mejoras, Barranquilla, No. 68, Abril, 1942.
⁴² El Heraldo, Enero 8, 1942, 8.
crowning ceremony as a public event, the Board achieved its goal of making it inclusive and to publicly proclaim Lolita I as the official Queen of all the barranquilleros. The event was considered a success, and since then, the coronation has become one of the main events of Barranquilla’s pre-Carnival season.

Fig. 24. Lolita Obregón escorted by Barranquilla’s Mayor, Don Juan David Montes, on her arrival to the Club Barranquilla, January 31, 1942. Photographer unknown. Archivo Museo Romántico, Barranquilla.

Following the crowning ceremony, the Mayor of the city, Don Juan David Montes, escorted the Queen to the Club Barranquilla, where a private ball in her honor was organized for the members of the club and their special guests. The photograph shows Miss Lolita Obregón, escorted by Barranquilla’s Mayor Don Juan David Montes,

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43 *El Heraldo*, Enero 31, 1942, 5.
making her entrance at the Club Barranquilla (Fig. 24). She wore an elegant gown and, like her predecessors, she sported the traditional paraphernalia of European monarchies, including the crown, the scepter, and the cape. These objects reinforce the symbolic image of the Queen as the sovereign of the carnival festivities, and illustrate the cultural dependence of the elite on European models, despite having achieved political independence from Spain for more than a century. From a semiological perspective, the fact that Lolita I was publicly escorted by the Mayor validated the monarchical authority invested in her during carnival times.

Fig. 25. “Royal Table,” Joaquín Roca Niz, President of the Club Barranquilla; Juanita Benjumea de Obregón, Queen’s mother; and Bertha de Dávila, artistic director of the evening’s “Spanish Fantasy,” Club Barranquilla, January 31, 1942. Photographer unknown. Published in Alfredo De la Espriella, Carnaval de Barranquilla. Centenario de la Batalla de Flores 1903-2003. Álbum del Recuerdo. Barranquilla: Editorial Mejoras, 2003, 73.

A photograph taken at the coronation ball held at the Club Barranquilla depicts the "Royal Table" assigned to the Queen and three of her special guests: Joaquin Roca
Niz, President of the Club; Juanita Benjumeda Obregón, the Queen’s mother; and Bertha Dávila, artistic director of the evening’s spectacle. As a maiden, the Queen was always accompanied by a chaperone, her mother in this case. In the original caption of the photograph, the word “doña” precedes the name of the Queen’s mother. The use of the word " doña, ” which means “lady” in Spanish, is commonly used in Barranquilla by members of the popular classes to address any woman considered of a higher social class, and constitutes another example of the strong cultural dependence on European models and class distinction.

Coincidentally, the theme of the evening’s spectacle was "Spanish Fantasy." It was customary to present a choreographed spectacle that would set the tone for the evening. That explains the elaborate Spanish costumes and the delicate mantillas worn by the ladies depicted in the picture. It is important to point out that the artistic direction of the evening’s spectacle was in the hands of a woman. As previously indicated, women played an important role in the planning of cultural activities and carnival celebrations in Barranquilla throughout the twentieth century.

Since the election of Lolita I, in 1942, with only one exception in 1948, Carnival Queens have been chosen among the young girls of the elite on a yearly basis. The figure of the Queen is so important for both the elite and the popular classes, that most carnivals are remembered not by the years in which they took place, but by the names of their Queens. In many cases, mothers, aunts, and cousins, have shared the honor of being chosen as Carnival Queens.

With time, this specific tradition has allowed the elite to maintain control of most aspects of the official carnival celebration. By choosing, on a yearly basis a young
woman from the upper class as symbol of the city’s festivities, the upper class has assurred the continuity of its leadership from generation to generation.44

Given the symbolic significance of the Carnival Queen, it is important to note how, from the beginning of this tradition, the elite promoted specific stereotypes regarding both her physical attributes and her behavior. The Carnival Queen, as the ideal type of the young “society girl,” served as a model not only for other girls of the elite, but also for the young girls of the popular classes, particularly those aspiring to be named popular queens. Carnival Queens became the example to follow, a difficult task, particularly for those who not only did not have the economic means to dress a certain way or attend certain events, but also and more important, for those who did not have the physical attributes including light skin or straight hair, and tried by all means to overcome what were seen as “limitations” in a white dominated society.

Despite the fact that, as sociologist Edgar Rey Sinning indicates, the elitist quality of the celebration has been consolidated through the election of the Carnival Queen among the young single women of the city’s elite,45 the public as a whole has embraced her and the figure of the queen made for a powerful reinforcement of key aspects of carnival she represented.

Election of the Carnaval de Barranquilla’s Popular Queens

An innovative program introduced by the Board in 1942 was the election of carnival’s Popular Queens. The idea, which was consistent with the government’s policy of promoting amusement opportunities among the working classes, was well received by

44 Kinser, 91.
45 Rey Sinning, 1997, 43.
community leaders and by the young women who looked forward to representing their communities and to promoting neighborhood festivities. The civic groups and the private clubs that supported this initiative promoted it as a new opportunity for the popular classes to participate in the celebration, and although that was true, it was also true that it allowed the elite to model and to control a new dimension of the popular celebrations utilizing its own criteria.

Members of the Sociedad de Mejoras Públicas of each neighborhood selected the girl who represented it during the festivities. The nomination of each individual queen took place in the neighborhood’s theater or caseta, which sponsored her float at the Batalla de Flores. On the day of the coronation of the Reinas Populares del Carnaval the candidates paraded through several streets and alleys of the popular neighborhoods riding on decorated floats. Upon reaching Dividivi Street, the candidates joined several orchestras, financed in part by the local industry, commercial enterprises and the organizers of the neighborhoods’ popular dances, -in a spectacle planned for the general public. María Teresa Ávila, representing the Barrio San Roque, Rita De Lima, representing the Barrio Atlántico or San Francisco, Victoria Gómez, representing the Barrios San Isidro and Alfonso López, and Catalina Ruiz, representing the Barrios Chiquinquirá and Rebolo, were crowned on Sunday, 1 February, 1942. The crowning ceremony was attended by the Carnival Queen, Miss Lolita Obregón, the carnival


princesses, representing the private clubs, and the Governor of the Departamento del Atlántico, Don Joaquín Ramón Lafaurie.⁴⁸

It is important to clarify that the election of Popular Queens reinforced class distinctions. At all the carnival activities in which the Popular Queens participated, the official Carnival Queen, Miss Lolita Obregón, a prestigious member of a local influential family, reminded us of who she was by occupying a special place as a guest of honor. It is also important to mention that although Miss Obregón was invited to attend all the official carnival events, including the Popular Queens, these young women representing the popular neighborhoods were not invited to participate in the dances organized by social clubs and were excluded from the elite’s private events.

The distinction was clearly marked even at the level of the manufacturing of crowns given to the carnival queens. A report indicates that a few days prior to the crowning ceremonies, J. A. Blanco ordered five crowns, a special one for the Queen of the Club Barranquilla and four for the Popular Queens.⁴⁹ Another important fact is that, besides one photograph of the float that won first prize for the category of neighborhood floats during the Batalla de Flores (Fig. 27), no images of the Popular Queens were featured in the local or national newspapers so there are no available visual records.

The creation of the Popular Queens pageant may have been portrayed by the local media as an attempt of the Junta Organizadora del Carnaval to represent the lower classes in the official carnival festivities, and to remove, to some extent, some of the class barriers by allowing them to participate together with the Carnival Queen and her


⁴⁹ *El Heraldo De Sociedad*, 16 Enero, 1942, 9.
princesses in some of the events, including the Batalla de Flores. However, some
scholars, including Friedemann, interpreted the creation of popular carnival pageants as a
mechanism of manipulation and control established by the dominant classes, which not
only imposed a new type of elite-conceived model (the beauty pageant) but also and most
important, “stimulated the division of the power source of the neighborhoods (...).”\textsuperscript{50}

**Official Carnival Program and Popular Contests**

Besides the crowning ceremony of the Carnival Queen, the official program of the
1942 carnival season included the Batalla de Flores, with its contests of floats, cars and
carriages, and the \textit{danzas}, comedies, individual costumes, small \textit{danzas}, children's
costumes, dance, folk songs, and musical ensemble competitions. Prizes worth $2,000
\textit{pesos} were awarded to the winners of the different competitions that took place on
Sunday, Monday, and Shrove Tuesday.\textsuperscript{51} The complete program, published in the
January issue of \textit{Revista Mejoras}, the official publication of the Sociedad de Mejoras Públicas, read as follows:

The royal carriage of Your Majesty Lolita I will open the great parade of
floats that will take part in this wonderful artistic expression. The main
front line of this great battle of flowers will be on the widest avenue of the
city, which has been charmingly decorated with five monumental
triumphal arches under which the ‘stalwart soldiers’ will joyful parade,
throwing handfuls of confetti intertwined with colorful streamers. At the
Avenida Olaya Herrera, which has been chosen to serve as the stage for
the traditional opening of the God Momo’s celebration, will be the jury,
who, on a richly decorated platform, will give the final ruling on the
competition of floats and decorated vehicles.

\textsuperscript{50} Friedemann 1985, 21.

\textsuperscript{51} A detailed list of the awards was published in “Carnaval de Barranquilla. Programa de los festejos de 1942.” \textit{Revista Mejoras}, Año VII, Barranquilla, Enero de 1942, No. 65, 53-54.
The *grandes danzas* contest will take place on 15 February, Carnival Sunday, at ten in the morning, at the Paseo Bolívar, in front of the Municipal Hall.

The comedies contest will be held on Carnival Sunday, 15 February, at two o'clock, in front of the building of the Banco Comercial de Barranquilla.

The individual costume contest will occur on Carnival Sunday, 15 February, at three in the afternoon, at the Paseo Bolívar, across the street from City Hall.

The *pequeñas danzas* contest will come about on Carnival Monday, 16 February, at ten in the morning at the Paseo de Bolívar.

The children's costume contest, will take place on Carnival Monday, 16 February, at four in the afternoon, in the special salon built for the children by the Board, located at the Avenida Olaya Herrera, between the streets of Jesus and San Juan.

The dance contest will take place on Carnival Monday, 16 February, at four in the afternoon, at the Paseo de Bolívar.

The popular songs contest will be held on Carnival Monday, 16 February, from eight to ten in the evening, at the Paseo Bolívar.

The typical *murgas* regional contest will take place simultaneously with the popular songs contest.\(^5\)

The Batalla de Flores parade opened the official carnival season on Saturday, 14 February, 1942. It began at 4 pm and followed a new route chosen by the Board featuring the newly paved Avenida Olaya Herrera, symbol of the city’s modern urban development. The parade began at Municipal Stadium, followed the Avenida Olaya Herrera and ended at the Paseo Bolívar. Not everyone agreed with changing the parade route. Many critics argued that extending it to a three-mile (five kilometers) route would require a great effort on behalf of the participants. However, the new route was adopted

\(^5\) *Revista Mejoras*, No. 65, Barranquilla, Enero de 1942, 53-54.
and decorated with festoons, banners, and lanterns of multicolored lights chosen by the subcommittee of decoration led by Mr. Miguel Eduardo Munárriz.

The public gathered on the sidewalks, boulevards, and balconies located along the way to enjoy the Batalla de Flores, a carefully planned parade carried out by the Board’s committee, despite the criticism expressed by those who complained that this new form of civic spectacle played down some of the essential features of the carnival, particularly its spontaneity and its participatory nature.53

In the end, the public enjoyed the parade, in which floats, cars, and carriages competed for special prizes. The following vehicles received special recognition: “Echoes of Carnival,” Queen’s float, “fuera de concurso;” “Barrio San Roque,” first prize neighborhoods’ floats; “Sleigh in the Russian Steppe,” first prize private floats; “Compañía Colombiana de Tabaco,” first prize business float, and “Carnival of Yesteryear,” first prize of carriages category.

53 Alfredo de La Espriella El Heraldo, Enero 29, 1992, 1C-2C
The float of the Carnival Queen, “Echoes of Carnival,” was not included in the competition because it outshined the rest of the floats. The vehicle was inspired by the traditional Batalla de Flores and was totally covered with fresh flowers. The Queen rode in the back seated on an elevated throne and dressed with the monarchical regalia, accompanied by the court of eight princesses seating at a lower level, keeping the proper protocol. On the left hand of the picture there is a palm tree, which illustrates the city’s tropical setting, and what seems to be a thatched roof house, a typical construction of the popular neighborhoods.

The participation of young women of the elite class in a public event may have been seen as an uncommon situation in a conservative society, but it was accepted and considered an honor in the context of Barranquilla’s carnival celebration. On the one hand, the inclusive nature of its society and the active participation of women in the
social and cultural life of the city since the beginning of the twentieth century may have paved the way for a more liberal approach to conservative gender rules, and, on the other hand, the participation of women in civic parades, particularly those with war-related roots, was customary not only in America but also in Europe. More important, because carnival is a celebration in which, in theory, all rules were broken or transgressed, having a public event in which women dominated the space generally occupied by men, was totally justified.
This float featuring "her Majesty Mayito I" Popular Queen of the Barrio San Roque, won the first prize in of neighborhoods’ category (Fig. 27). The vehicle was beautifully decorated and included the name of the city written in front of the carriage as a sign of pride and a symbol of identity. Modeled after the Carnival Queen’s setting, the
Popular Queen rode above the rest of the girls of her court, wearing a white gown inspired in European fashion, associated with purity, prestige and high culture.


The first prize in the category of private floats was awarded to "Sleigh in the Russian Steppe," a beautiful reproduction of a sleigh pulled by two life-size real-life looking deer, an original creation considering it was uncommon to see winter scenes in the streets of the tropical Arenosa. The sleigh carried several members of Barranquilla’s elite, wearing elaborate Russian traditional costumes. The richness of the costumes showed the wealth of the people who either imported the costumes or had them made by local seamstresses with imported fabrics and trims. The theme was probably inspired by the fact that, in 1941, Colombia joined the Allies that were fighting World War II, including the Soviet Union.
The float that won first prize in the “business” category was sponsored by the largest national tobacco company, the Compañía Colombiana de Tabaco (Coltabaco), founded in 1919. The image of the redskin Indian represented its most popular product,
the Pielroja cigarette. Designed originally by renowned Colombian caricaturist Ricardo Rendón, its distinctive logo featuring the profile of a North American Indian wearing a feather headdress has illustrated the cigarette’s package for over eighty years. In the 1940s, the image became not only the focus of a major advertising campaign but also a symbol of Colombian national identity, as Pielroja became the main competitor against imported foreign brands. It is appropriate to mention that tobacco played a significant role in Barranquilla’s economic development, not only as an important export product but also as the raw material used in Coltabaco’s stemmery, an industry that provided jobs for the local population and that still functions today.

![Image of a vintage carriage with people from the 1940s](image)


The first prize in the carriage category was awarded to "Carnival of Yesteryear," a vehicle that reminded people of the mode of transportation and the fashions at the
beginning of the twentieth century. The photograph depicts two couples riding a carriage pulled by horses. Compared to the carriages used in 1903 (Figs. 16 and 17) there are several differences. The coachman is no longer a black man, but a costeño who wears a long-sleeve shirt, long pants, and shoes, simple clothes that do not compete with the elegant outfits of the people riding the carriage. The vehicle is not decorated with flowers, as by now it is considered an antique. Perhaps the most striking difference is the house depicted in the background of the most recent photograph, which illustrates the modern houses of the upper class neighborhoods in the 1940s. This house, made of painted concrete walls, Spanish tiles, and a chimney, is an interesting detail considering the tropical climate of the city, and illustrates not only the modernization of the city’s urban setting, but also the financial wealth of the city’s upper class.

Another comparison illustrates widening differences between wealthy and poor neighborhoods. The hatched-roof house that appears in the background of the Queen’s float (Fig. 26) contrasts with the modern house featured behind the carriage (Fig. 30). The differences in materials exemplify the rising contrasts between the living standards of the upper and the lower classes.
Costumes are the essence of any carnival celebration and the Junta Organizadora del Carnaval recognized their importance and the creativity of the barranquilleros by awarding the first and second prizes to the costumes illustrated in these photographs. The first prize was presented to Mr. José Saúl Bello who disguised himself as a robot, a symbol of modernity. The second prize was given to the Oriental couple personified by
Mr. Humberto Laino H. and Miss Leoni Sánchez.⁵⁴ The couple, representing a Chinese
man and a Japanese woman, was considered exotic from the perspective of Barranquilla’s
cosmopolitan elite. Interestingly, Japanese citizens were banned from the celebration due
to the restrictions they faced because of the international conflict, while Chinese citizens
were becoming an important group within the multi-ethnic/multi-national composition of
the city’s population.

Prizes were also awarded to comedias (theatrical representations) to recognize the
creativity of the barranquilleros who during carnival times, used their artistic talent and
their sense of humor to entertain the public and/or to convey a moral message, as
indicated in some of the titles like “The fatality of the vice” and “Motherly Love.” The
contest of pequeñas danzas was an excellent setting for the presentation of folkloric
expressions including El Paloteo (first prize), Los Indios de Trenza (second prize), and
Los Negros de Bolívar (honorable mention), among others.⁵⁵ These traditional dances of
African and Indigenous roots are still performed in today’s carnival.⁵⁶

Prizes for children costumes were given to Adolfito del Valle and Nicolasita de la
Rosa (notice the use of diminutives, which may be interpreted as a paternalistic attitude)
for dressing up as campesinos costeños. The kids, who through their costumes
romanticized the image of the Caribbean rural worker, received toys instead of cash.⁵⁷

It is important to recognize the Board’s effort to encourage the participation of
children in various carnival events and to provide them with their own popular salón.

⁵⁵ Ibid.
⁵⁶ For a description of these dances see Appendix.
Located at the Avenida Olaya Herrera between Jesús and San Juan streets, and organized under the direction of Mr. Henry Fuenmayor and Mr. Miguel Eduardo Munarriz, it provided a safe and age-appropriate environment for minors, and carried a message for future leaders: the need to include the new generations in the celebration to assure the continuity of carnival traditions.

Despite the fact that the Board made an effort to include the popular classes in the different events of the official program of the carnival celebration, local newspapers rarely documented their participation. Besides the information included in the Board’s reports, no additional records were found regarding the names or the description of the danzas other than those who received prizes. The fact that the print media was not interested in this aspect of carnival celebration is not surprising. After all, the popular classes were not their target readers since they did not have the economic power to purchase the luxury products and services advertised in their pages.

Furthermore, as Friedemann indicated, the government’s intentions may have not been necessarily to support and exalt carnival’s popular manifestations, including the danzas, but rather to establish a mechanism of control through the organization of contests and the allocation of auxilios which stimulated divisiveness among the popular groups.  

The dates the danzas were founded may suggest which groups may have participated in the 1942 carnival celebrations, but it is important to keep in mind that some of them may have not participated continuously. Historians must rely on oral

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58 Friedemann 1985, 21.
testimonies provided by the directors and older members of the *danzas* who may have participated during that particular year.

For example, Alonso Fontalvo, director of the Danza el Torito, confirmed the participation of the *danza* in the 1942 Carnaval de Barranquilla: “Even during the Guerra de los Mil Días, the Danza del Torito went out to dance in the neighborhood’s streets. All the members went out in costume, encouraging neighbors to participate in the celebration. According to the archives of the Danza el Torito and from what I was told by my elders, the *danza* went out to dance and drink during the days of carnival.”

Luis Altamar de la Vega, founder of the Cumbiamba El Cañonazo, recalled how carnival was celebrated in the 1930s and the beginning of the 1940s:

> Before, we dressed in costume during Carnival because we liked it; we carried the festivity in body and soul. Today is not like that, it is not the same, and there are many personal interests. In other times, society mingled in the salones, not knowing who was rich, middle class or poor because everyone went to the Salón Carioca, paid $2.00 pesos to enter, and danced until very early in the morning (...)

> In the 1930s and early 1940s things were healthier, and the *danzas* and costumes went out at night, ‘gnaw’ the small city, and returned in the early morning without any trouble or danger; the *danza* I belonged to was called La Burra Mocha, it came out during pre-Carnival, on Tuesdays and Thursdays we walked the streets of the Barrio Lucero, from there we went to the Barrio Abajo that was at the time like Chiquinquirá and San Roque, neighborhoods where the high society lived, they were gentlemen arrived from abroad, Arabs, Turks, Germans, Jews, Italians, from all over Europe; then the *danza* would go to Rebolo and we danced until two or three o'clock in the morning.

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60 Fabio Ortiz Ribón, “Testimonio de Luis Altamar de la Vega, fundador de la Cumbiamba El Cañonazo” in *Mi vida es un carnaval, dieciocho testimonios gozones de todos los tiempos* (Barranquilla: Fondo Editorial del Instituto Distrital de Cultura y Turismo, 2007), 49-50.
De la Vega’s testimony provides a personal account of the way carnival was celebrated in the 1940s. He recalls that in the Salón Carioca members of all social classes gathered together to celebrate carnival. This confirms that members of the upper classes were allowed to participate in the events organized for the lower classes, which means social class distinctions were transgressed in one direction. Another interesting fact mentioned in his testimony is that in the 1940s, despite the organization of parades and contests and the Board’s efforts to control and organize the seasonal events in an orderly manner, *barranquilleros* continued celebrating carnival in a spontaneous way, roaming the streets of the lower and upper class neighborhoods. Finally, he focuses on an important aspect of the city’s demographics, the strong presence of foreigners whom he identifies as members of the “high” class, not necessarily because they belonged to the elite, but because they were entrepreneurs that eventually became part of the city’s middle class.

Another important fact that was not mentioned by the press was the presence of the *ruedas de Cumbia* or *cumbiambas* during carnival times. Although no one knows exactly when these began to appear in carnival celebrations, oral testimonies confirm these were performed at the Barrio Abajo and Barrio Arriba (*Rebolo*) and were part of the city’s pre-carnival tradition in the nineteenth century. As Ubaldo Mendoza, Director of the Cumbiamba La Revoltosa, indicated,

The *ruedas de Cumbia* were performed during the celebration of the Virgen del Carmen, La Candelaria, the Immaculate Conception, San Roque, San Martín de Loba, etc. On the days of the vigil, devotees of these saints placed a *guadua* rod with a red flag in the center of the street, indicating a *Rueda de Cumbia* would take place. The homeowner provided sufficient rum and candles, which were bought in bunches. It was customary that men purchased the candles and offered them to the woman they wanted to dance with. The music was played by a group equipped
with a double patch drum, called *bombo* or *tambora,* a single patch drum called *alegre* and a smaller one called *llamador,* a pair of maracas, male and female, a *guache,* and accompanied by a *millo* flute, a *carrizo* or a *corozo.* The musicians were placed in the center where the *guadua* rod was originally placed, and the *cumbiamberos* danced in circle around them, women on the outside and the men on the inside, moving in a counter-clockwise way.

From the traditional *ruedas de Cumbia* originated the first *cumbiambas* that participated in the Carnaval de Barranquilla, some of which linger in people’s memories including *La Varita de Caña,* *Que va gallo que va,* *El Talego,* *El Páramo de las Nieves,* *El Caracol,* *El Ventarrón,* *Palo con esa gente,* and *La Sultana,* among others.\(^{61}\)

Although none of the *cumbiambas* mentioned by Mendoza survived as carnival groups, many of their former members joined new ones or founded their own groups that still participate in carnival parades. It is important to clarify that although the original *ruedas de Cumbia* had in their origins religious overtones, their contemporary versions are generally presented as expressions of Colombia’s Caribbean folklore.

**Carnival and the Media**

An important aspect of the 1942 celebrations is the role of the media in promoting and publicizing carnival as a civic spectacle. Local newspapers such as El Heraldo and La Prensa provided information about the creation of the Junta Organizadora del Carnaval, the implementation of its official carnival program, and the celebration of the different activities related to the celebration of the “carnaval de élite,” which filled their social pages.

Not only the printed press, but moreover the radio played a significant role in supporting the Board’s intentions of reaching the popular classes. Considering the high

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rates of illiteracy that existed at the time, the radio was the ideal medium to provide entertainment and to reach the public with information regarding the carnival program and any latest news. The radio also reached an audience that was unable to see or participate in the events. By transmitting live from carnival’s official events, the radio enabled the majority of the city’s population to, at least vicariously, be part of the celebration.

An ad published in El Heraldo by the local radio station Emisoras Unidas, confirms the radio’s intentions to transmit live from the carnival events and to reach the general public:

Emisoras Unidas
Barranquilla devotes itself to Carnival!
Thousands of thousands of people are roaming on the streets and the salones
Emisoras Unidas
With a special and exclusive arrangement with the Board the radio will broadcast all of the program’s events.
Emisoras will be in the dance halls the Board has installed throughout the city.
It will be anywhere there will be a carnival act.
Your advertising will be heard simultaneously by 160,000 people in Barranquilla if you trust Emisoras.
Call Armando Carbonell or Julio and Ricardo Angulo R. for more details.
Phones: 26-76 and 20-07.62

Another important role played by the radio stations was the promotion of carnival music, both foreign and local. Radio stations transmitted live from the salones populares and other public scenarios where carnival dances took place. They transmitted local, national, and international orchestras, providing free entertainment for the masses and promoting the rising record industry.

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62 El Heraldo, Febrero 9, 1942, 5.
Given the cosmopolitan character of the city and its cultural and commercial relationship with the Caribbean, Cuban and Dominican music were particularly popular during carnival celebrations. As writer Roque Jiménez Urriola indicated, “the Cuban and later the Dominican influences were big; ‘El manicero,’ ‘La maricutana,’ and ‘Cachita’ were heard. During this decade (1940s), local music continued to develop. In Barranquilla, the Emisora Atlántico Jazz Band, directed by Master Guido Perla was very popular, as well as Cartagena’s Orquesta de la Emisora Fuentes.”

Rafael Bassi and Jairo Solano further explain that,

Judicious exercises performed by the most knowledgeable veterans of the likes of feverish dancers, such as Alvaro Ruiz and Marco T. Barros, show that in all the carnivals, since the jukebox became popular in the city (1928) and records and acetates recorded abroad became available, Caribbean music was introduced, especially Cuban, Dominican, and Puerto Rican, receiving the affections of Barranquilla’s residents, avid for fashion and innovation. Since then, in the field of popular music, we found congas, guajiras, merengues, tumbas From Curacao, Haitian rhythms, foxtrot and American jazz, a good deal of boleros, danzones, cha-cha-chás and mambos on all carnival celebrations (...).

During the decade of the 1940s, Colombian music found in talented musicians and great composers like Lucho Bermúdez and José Barros Palomino, the sweeper and stopper capable of filling the goal-scoring desires of from the Antilles’ musicians. Music without borders takes us back to those distant times, listening to Don Miguel Matamoros and his trio at the prenatal lullaby entitled “La mujer de Antonio,” and the musical exuberance of Dámaso Pérez Prado in “Qué rico el mambo.”

The recognition of Colombian musicians went hand in hand with the acceptance of popular music as part of carnival’s repertoire. In a way, it was carnival that catapulted popular rhythms, mostly of African roots, to mainstream local and national radio

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64 Rafael Bassi and Jairo Solano, “Cuatro días bajo el signo de la música del Caribe,” in Laurian Puerta, comp. Carnaval en la Arenosa (Barranquilla: Fondo de Publicaciones de la Universidad del Atlántico, 1999), 103-104.
transmissions and music markets. The Emisora Atlántico Jazz Band, for example, featured famous musicians in the 1940s and 1950s including Pacho Galán and Antonio María Peñaloza, who composed carnival’s anthem, “Te olvidé.” As for the music the band played at carnival balls, besides jazz, a clear influence of North American popular culture, it performed boleros, guarachas, pasodobles, sambas, and porros, a varied repertoire which showed not only its cosmopolitan character, but also the acceptance of popular local rhythms (the porro) as part of mainstream culture.65

Historically the timing was right, as embracing popular culture was part of the modern attitude that permeated society at the time. Radio stations played international Caribbean rhythms as well as local ones, many of which originated in the traditional danzas and the folkloric expressions of the Carnaval de Barranquilla. Porros and fandangos became part of their programs, as indicated in an ad for Emisoras Unidas published in El Heraldo: “Carnival! Porros, cumbias, mapalés, fandangos… Listen to them from six thirty to seven PM in ‘debut album,’ by Emisoras Unidas.”66

Conclusions

With the creation of the Junta Organizadora del Carnaval, in 1941, a new era began in the administration of the festivities. Carnival events had been transformed from spontaneous popular expressions to planned spectacles programmed by the Board’s officers and committees, following the specific political, social, and economic interests of the people in charge. As the city grew demographically, it became necessary to adjust to the needs of the community and to assure the continuity of traditional carnival


66 El Heraldo, Febrero 14, 1942, 5.
expressions and events, but also and perhaps more important, to establish mechanisms of order and control.

The elite saw carnivals as civic events that helped mold the identity of the city. *Salones populares* were opened to a large segment of the population and street parades became more organized. *Danzas* from different neighborhoods competed with one another for the best performances, costumes, dancing, and music, in carefully planned contests that illustrated the modern aspect of Barranquilla’s society.

From a sociological perspective, as Edgar Rey Sinning indicates, the elitist character of the Carnaval de Barranquilla consolidated itself through the lavish balls that took place in Barranquilla’s private clubs, attended exclusively by its members, and the election of the official Carnival Queen among the young women of the city’s elite.67

At the same time, the objectives of the Board provided new opportunities for the popular classes to participate in all of the major official events planned for the occasion, including the crowning ceremony, the Batalla de Flores, and the different contests organized throughout the weekend. This “inclusive” and “participatory” strategy was in tune with a larger political agenda promoted by the country’s Liberal government, following the examples of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal, in the United States, and Lázaro Cárdenas’ programs, in Mexico.68 By including the popular classes in all official events and organizing the *salones populares* to provide entertainment and jobs, the government sought to gain their appreciation and political support. But the paternalistic and political relationships that arose in the early 1940s, together with the differences among social classes and the fight for the control of the organization of the

67 Rey Sinning, 1997, 43.
68 Bushnell, 269.
festivities, would become a problem as carnival continued to grow and the city’s economy began to decline at the end of the decade.
CHAPTER FOUR

CARNIVAL DE BARRANQUILLA, 1992: CRISIS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Historical Context

At the end of the 1940s, the power struggle between Colombia’s official political parties, Liberal and Conservador, provoked new bloody confrontations among their followers and massive displacements of the population towards the country’s urban centers. The period known as La Violencia ended with the Frente Nacional (1958-1974), an agreement between the two parties which gave each one the right to assume the country’s presidency every four years, for a period of sixteen years. This arrangement helped resolve the hostility between the leading political parties and gave them total control of the government. Since the president appointed the governors and they in turn appointed the mayors, there was no room for political opposition.

Communist and socialist guerrilla movements were born in the 1960s as a result of the lack of political participation, the discontent with the government’s bureaucracy and the prevalence of clientelismo. In addition to facing guerrillas’ terrorism, Colombia began to experience a new type of violence resulting from drug trafficking at the end of the 1970s, and subsequently went through political and financial instability during the economic crisis of the 1980s.¹ Barranquilla was not immune to the economic and political instability experienced by the rest of the country. While historically the city had lower rates of violence than Bogota, Cali and Medellin, this did not mean it did not suffer the consequences of Colombia’s armed conflicts. The main impact was undoubtedly the city’s population growth. From the 1950s until the end of the Frente Nacional in 1970,

¹ Bushnell, 353-388.
and from the 1980s until today, the city received a significant number of "desplazados."
Experiencing great difficulties in the absorption of these waves of migrants, the city faced serious social issues which were exacerbated by rising unemployment levels, lack of low-income housing and deficits in basic services, including health and education. Within this context, various groups including guerrillas, paramilitary groups, gangs, common criminals and drug traffickers fueled the increase in violence.

Drug traffickers, in particular, played a central role in the rise of violence in Barranquilla. The arrival of the “marimberos” (drug traffickers dealing with marihuana) in the 1970s and the members of the Cartel de la Costa (cocaine traffickers) during the 1980s and 1990s, had a strong impact on Barranquilla’s society. They provoked important changes in consumption patterns and were directly responsible for the development of the sicariato (paid assassins). Drug money permeated the local formal economy and, although there is no clear evidence, it is likely that in some form or another drug money permeated carnival’s economy.²

In 1990, President César Gaviria called for a government of “national unity” to find solutions to the many challenges Colombia faced at the time. Guerrilla groups, including the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), and the Movimiento 19 de Abril (M19), and drug cartels were a major source of violence and instability. Economically, the government faced high unemployment rates, unequal income distribution, wide gaps between rich and poor and limited opportunities of upward mobility for the middle class.³ At the government level,

³ Ibid, 356.
regional administrators denounced the uneven distribution of the national budget, while the media criticized the bureaucracy and the corruption that resulted from the fact that governors and mayors were appointed and not elected by popular vote.

A new Constitution, written in 1991 under President Gaviria’s administration, introduced laws intended to resolve some of the problems bedeviling the country, including the democratic election of governors and mayors for the first time in Colombia’s history. The document also reorganized the distribution of the national budget, giving the departamentos more autonomy and increasing their resources to support their own economic needs.⁴

In Barranquilla, the first mayors elected by popular vote, Miguel Bolívar Acuña (1990-1991) and Bernando Hoyos Montoya (1992-1994), faced many challenges including the need to provide basic services to the city’s growing population, which by 1985, had surpassed one million residents.⁵ At the beginning of the 1990s, the city was immersed in an economic crisis, caused in part by the decline of its industries, the rise of smuggling activities, the violence caused by the guerrillas and drug trafficking, and the bureaucracy of the local government which was both inefficient and corrupt. This situation was not new, but rather the result of half a century of social, political and economic decline.

By the end of the 1940s, Barranquilla had lost its dominance as the primary port for exports to Buenaventura, located on Colombia’s Pacific coast, which had an

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⁴ Ibid. 356, 359, 391.

⁵ Ibid, 444.
advantageous position given its proximity to the Andes’ coffee zones. The expansion of the country’s new road and rail-based transport networks displaced the Magdalena River as the connecting hub with the country’s interior, causing the bankruptcy and/or downsizing of the shipping companies. Higher energy and higher wage costs also had an impact in the decline of Barranquilla’s industry.⁶

The loss of economic momentum happened at the same time new political groups that opposed the private sector’s interests gained control of the local government. In 1942, the Liga de Comercio claimed that while the municipality of Medellin took measures to promote the regional industry, Barranquilla’s council took “onerous measures against the local industry”⁷ such as taking over the control of the Empresas Públicas Municipales, the corporation in charge of providing water, sewer, and garbage collection services. The local newspaper La Prensa warned its readers: "with the pretext to impose controls that will benefit the general population, serious disturbances are being introduced in the country's economic structure and may cause losses whose impact can be so dangerous that the expected collective benefit may become a deplorable collapse."⁸ As La Prensa predicted, the government’s controlling practices meant to benefit the general population led not only to the collapse of the city’s public services, but also to the crisis of its most important cultural expression, the Carnaval de Barranquilla.

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⁷ Ibid.
⁸ La Prensa, mayo 16 1942. Cited in Posada Carbó, 263.
Carnival in Crisis

Since the creation of the Junta Organizadora del Carnaval, in 1942, government-run institutions including the Junta Permanente del Carnaval, the Comité Cívico, and the Corporación Autónoma del Carnaval organized all official carnival events. All the organizations pursued the same goals: “to attract tourism and to elevate the artistic sense of the people in the presentation of their traditional dances and costumes.”

Carnival evolved from spontaneous popular cultural expression to staged spectacle, closely managed and supervised by the government in charge. A few changes were implemented over the years. In 1947, the crowning ceremony of the Carnival Queen, Ana María Emiliani, took place at the Estadio Municipal in order to accommodate the growing number of attendees, most of them members of the popular classes. Their presence validated the government’s appointment of a young woman from the elite class as the symbol of the popular festivity. Three years later, Edith Munarriz was crowned Carnival Queen at the Paseo Bolívar. In this case, in addition to choosing a site that accommodated a large number of spectators from the popular classes, the Junta Organizadora del Carnaval brought back the celebration to its original venue, the city’s main street, located near the popular neighborhoods of the Barrio Arriba and Barrio Abajo, the birth place of Barranquilla’s popular carnival.

In order to promote Barranquilla as a tourist destination, the 1955 festivities included the first International Carnival Pageant with the participation of candidates.

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10 De la Espriella, 2003, 84-85.
11 Ibid. 91.
representing twelve countries, including Costa Rica, Peru, Honduras, Nicaragua, Haiti, Puerto Rico, Salvador, Guatemala, and Jamaica. This type of event was reproduced several times throughout the history of the celebration, benefiting the government through the collection of taxes and other benefits from tourist-related businesses including airlines, hotels, and entertainment venues.

Another initiative that became an integral part of the celebration was the organization of the Festival de Orquestas, which took place for the first time at the Coliseo Cubierto, in 1964. The festival included national and international bands and music groups that competed for the Congo de Oro award. In addition to obtaining the prestigious recognition, the winners benefited from media coverage and lucrative contracts with record companies. From the organizer’s perspective, the festival brought the media’s attention and promoted the city as a destination for music aficionados.

In 1967, in an effort to include more traditional groups, the Gran Parada was organized on carnival Sunday. The parade began at the Parque Bellavista and followed the calle 72 to the Estadio Municipal, where the best groups were awarded prizes. The organization of this new parade responded to the needs of the city’s growing population, which included migrants from rural areas who continued to arrive despite the decline of the local economy.

No major changes were implemented during the 1970s and 1980s. Pre-carnival and carnival events continued to be organized under the supervision of the government-run institutions, which were known for their bureaucracy and the corruption of their

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12 Ibid. 102.

13 Ibid 114.

14 Ibid 120.
members. Under the management of the Corporación Autónoma del Carnaval, in particular, carnival experienced serious problems, including its “politization,” lack of funding, poor organization, and unethical behavior by some of the individuals who were in charge accused of bribery and theft.

An article regarding the creation of the Corporación Autónoma del Carnaval, published on January 1980 predicted the kind of problems that would evolve from putting carnival’s organization in the hands of government officials:

This monotony so desired by some will not last in Barranquilla where two Carnivals will soon take place: the traditional festival of King Momo and mitaca elections. Both will happen within a few weeks, so it's not surprising that some savvy politicians will aspire to ‘fish in the river’ some electoral dividends ‘in the troubled waters’ of the animated festivities.

To begin, the barranquilleros already received the unpleasant surprise that full-time politicians such as councilmen and parliamentarians are now part of the organizing board, under the new Corporación Autónoma del Carnaval, created by the municipal council.

The first sign of discontent was given by none other than liberal senator José Name Terán who, at Mayor Paccini Solano’s office, in the presence of journalists, openly expressed his disagreement with the creation of the new board.

The private sector also began to show its disapproval for the political nuance that had been given back to our ultimate festivity. And we all know the blow that would represent for the organization if it decided to drop out, because the industry and the commerce are the ones that fund it with their hefty contributions. And people already know the sad experience of Carnival with a political flavor, and hence the instinctive rejection that a celebration as original, spontaneous, and popular, can be exploited by a few to exchange ‘crown jewels’ for electoral votes.

Carnival and politics have always been an explosive mixture whose only result in prior times, but always present in our memory, has been the most spectacular failure.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{15}El Heraldo, jueves, enero 3, 1980, 3.
The article warned the general public of the political nuances the festivities would acquire in the hands of government officials who would use them to manipulate people’s votes during parliamentary elections and utilize their power to receive political favors. Despite the opposition expressed through the media, the Corporación Autónoma del Carnaval remained in charge of the celebration for over a decade.

The lack of trust in the government’s ability to manage carnival in an efficient and transparent way caused the private sector to partially withdraw from financially supporting the festivities’ official events in the 1980s. The Corporación Autónoma del Carnaval struggled to gain the endorsement of the private sector and developed alternative strategies, including a radio-thon in 1982, organized in an effort to raise ten million pesos required to put together the different events. In the end the budget fell short.16

“Carnival was excellent, but could have been better…” said the president of the 1982 Carnival, who despite all the setbacks and obstacles was able to move forward thanks to his commitment and tenacity, which allowed him to put together a Carnival very few people believed in. ‘The best (events) were the Lectura del Bando, and the Desfile Náutico… There were flaws, including the delay of the start of the Batalla de Flores due to the tardiness of the danzas. Of all the floats that were supposed to participate with the support of the private sector, only 30 came out (…)

And the money? We do not know how much the celebration cost, but yes, we do have a deficit of $ 1,500,000 pesos; unfortunately the private sector did not cooperate, many people closed their doors and others that promised to help did not meet their commitments.17

This testimony highlights the lack of clarity in the management of carnival’s funds (the president declared he did not know how much they had spent), and the lack of

16 El Heraldo, miércoles, enero 27, 1982, 16.

17 “El gran problema del carnaval: financiación dijo la Reina del Carnaval Mireya Caballero en la tertulia de El Heraldo.” El Heraldo, viernes, febrero 26, 1982, 5B.
responsibility of the Corporación Autónoma del Carnaval, which acquired a debt of $1,500,000 pesos.

Carnival’s financial crisis was such that, according to former director of Barranquilla’s Chamber of Commerce, Enrique Berrío, the 1982 Carnival Queen, Mireya Caballero, had to ask for money on the city’s streets in order to raise funds to organize different carnival events. In the past, Carnival Queens had the financial responsibility to cover their own expenses but were not required to raise funds for the organization of carnival events. Due to the lack of support of the private sector and the government’s limited funding, Caballero had no other choice but to ask the general public to help her finance the festivities.

One of the most outrageous aspects of the politicians and local leaders’ abuse of their positions during carnival times was the manipulation of the election of the neighborhoods’ popular queens. In 1982, Carnival Queen Mireya Caballero Pérez expressed her concern when she asserted that “(...) we need an impartial jury, honest, without political leaks, to select the Reina de Reinas (Queen of the Popular Queens). This can only be achieved if they carefully choose the people who serve on the jury.”

Her concern for the jury’s impartiality was based on the unfortunate fact that local leaders and politicians manipulated many of the young girls in unethical ways, including demanding sexual favors even though many of them were minors.

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18 Enrique Berrío, interviewed by the author, 11 September, 2012.
19 “Mireya pide mayor colaboración para éxito del carnaval.” El Heraldo, sábado, enero 16, 1982, 14 A.
Another aspect of the organization of popular pageants involved the control of the popular classes through divisiveness and political favors. Government and local leaders used their influence to nominate girls who had the support of the local community and expected their followers to support their political campaigns. As Friedemann indicated,

The pageants in the neighborhoods are a source of power for the working class. As such, they become the target of control of the ruling classes. (…)

The Nueva Junta de Carnaval focuses on the popular pageants, considered “the engine of the neighborhoods.”

Each group of the 77 mobilized in 1977 around an equal number of candidate queens, gathers a significant number of people. These people and their organizations are the focus of interest of the ruling classes in their search for power and control.

As part of the overall organization of the popular pageants, competition stimulates the division of the power source of the neighborhoods.²¹

Year after year, a few intellectuals and members of the press criticized the fact that carnival was in the hands of corrupt government officials whose sole priority appeared to be using the celebration for their own political and personal benefit. Organizing the festivities for the enjoyment of the general public was not in the minds of most people in charge of their organization and the few who cared had other responsibilities and generally waited until the last minute to put together a program with very limited funds.

By the 1980s, the festivities had ceased to be a priority for the members of the very body charged with organizing the celebration, the Corporación Autónoma del Carnaval. Most members changed on a yearly basis and most of them had no particular interest in the success of the event except for the individual benefits they obtained through economic gains or political favors. Those few who did care faced many

²¹ Friedemann 1985, 21.
difficulties, particularly the lack of funding and little time to organize the different events. An article published in the local newspaper El Heraldo, in 1985, explained the situation as follows:

If anything has characterized the Carnaval de Barranquilla it is its dramatic organization. Once the festival ends with the burial of Joselito, nobody talks about it or wants to know about the next carnival until the end of the year, when the mayor endorses or removes the representative on the organizing board and starts discussing the matter. The president of the board does not even know if he is going to be in charge again...

Guy de Castro went through the same experience the previous five Presidents went through: Pepe De Andreis, Pedro Vengoechea, Oscar Fernández, Roberto De Castro, Farid Char, starting from scratch, getting one million pesos placed in a CDT -the only revenue obtained from the previous Carnival- breaking a sweat knocking on the doors of the industry and the commerce. Nobody understands what the Corporación Autónoma del Carnaval is about, when every year people rush to go forward with the celebration. This year (1985) they began to speak seriously about Carnival in the first week of January...22

The public’s discontent escalated as irregularities continued to be exposed by the press, but for years no changes were implemented. Not even the report of corruption and mismanagement cases inspired officials to reconsider changing the way carnival was managed at the time.

Four members of the Corporación Autónoma del Carnaval were about to come to blows yesterday during a heated discussion in the Sociedad de Mejoras Públicas during a press conference attended by twenty journalists.

The representative of the journalists, Manuel Vargas Cruz, and the municipal comptroller, Rodolfo Palacio Iguarán, had to be separated because they were going to attack each other. Shortly thereafter, the chairman of the board, Hernando Roncallo Buendía, and the representative of the Sociedad de Mejoras Públicas, Alberto Maradey, staged another violent exchange of words. In the course of the discussion they uncovered irregularities such as the theft of cash, buying items with surcharges, vested interests among the members of the Corporation in the different

22 El Heraldo, domingo, febrero 10, 1985, 9A.
events, politics in the election of popular queens and an organizational chaos of enormous dimensions.\textsuperscript{23}

Although the Corporation was under constant attack by its critics and appeared to be on the verge of ruining carnival by the mid-1980s, it took five more years until a favorable political context facilitated the creation of a new entity in charge of handling carnival’s official events in a more transparent and professional way.

\textbf{Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A.}

In the mid-1980s, the organization of the carnival festivities was still in the hands of the Corporación Autónoma del Carnaval, under the umbrella of the municipal government. Local councilors appointed its members and all decisions made by its board were subject to the councilors’ approval. At that point, carnival had become a political instrument of the local government and was in total crisis. The lack of funding and the mismanagement led to the decline in the quality of the events and the virtual disappearance of the traditional groups that were the essence of the celebration.

In 1985-1986, Arturo Sarabia, a local attorney and politician, and Jaime Abello, approached the leaders of Barranquilla’s Chamber of Commerce and suggested organizing a forum to discuss the future of the city’s festivities. The forum, which lasted two or three days, proposed a formula to improve carnival’s organization: to create a mixed-economy entity that would free the celebration from the political arena and allow the participation of both the local government and the private sector.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{23} “En rueda de prensa: bronca entre la junta del carnaval.” \textit{El Heraldo}, jueves, febrero 6, 1986, 10A.

\textsuperscript{24} Enrique Berrío, interviewed by the author, September 11, 2012.
According to Enrique Berrío, former president of Barranquilla’s Chamber of Commerce, four years went by until the opportunity arose to implement the forum’s recommendation:

During the 1990 carnival, under the management of the Junta Permanente del Carnaval, there were many irregularities including the “disappearance” of the funds collected from the Festival de Orquestas’ box office. The president of the Junta, Paul Tarud, was appalled by the situation and decided it was time to do something about the corruption and the theft that occurred during carnival celebrations. He spoke to the members of the Municipal Council and convinced them to approve the creation of a mixed-economy organization that would take over the organization of the carnival official events.25

The government would remain involved up to a certain extent, but it would allow the participation of the private sector, which would provide much needed support in the areas of financing and logistics.

When Tarud approached Berrío, he pointed out “there was an error in the conception of the mixed-economy corporation.” Being a Sociedad Anónima (Limited Corporation), it could not issue certificates for tax deductions. Since the members of the Municipal Council had approved the proposal, Tarud decided to go forward with the project with the idea of looking for an alternative to this particular issue in the future.26

The new mixed-economy entity in charge of organizing the carnival festivities, Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A., was approved by the Municipal Council in 1991 and incorporated in January 1992. At that time, the municipal government retained fifty-one percent of the shares of the corporation and other agencies, including Barranquilla’s

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25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
Chamber of Commerce, the Fundación Mario Santo Domingo, Fundacaribe, ProBarranquilla, and the Fondo Mixto de Promociones Turísticas, forty-nine percent of the shares. The main reason for creating Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. was the need to isolate carnival’s organization from the government’s political influence, bureaucracy and mismanagement that had affected the festivities in the past. Although the government held the majority of the shares –carnival was after all a public celebration that occurred in public spaces- the participation of other organizations gave the board the opportunity to manage carnival in a more professional and transparent manner.

As Mayor Miguel Bolívar Acuña indicated at the signing of the resolution, "this company is important because it will end the problem of interference of political interests in the Carnaval de Barranquilla. This is a solemn act because it puts an end to twenty-five or thirty years of (that kind of) practice in relation to the organization of the carnival."

An article in La Libertad described the creation of the new entity as follows:

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27 The Fundación Mario Santo Domingo is a private non-profit organization dedicated to the implementation of social development programs that contribute to improving the quality of life of the poor in Colombia through the construction of sustainable communities, microfinance, and various special projects operated from their headquarters in Barranquilla, Cartagena and Bogota. www.fmsd.org.co (accessed 11 September, 2012).

28 The Fundación para el Desarrollo Integral de la Región Caribe Colombiana (Fundacaribe) is a non-profit organization created by Barranquilla’s Chamber of Commerce to promote the safeguard of the architectural heritage of the city. It had an active participation in the recovery of the Montoya railroad station and the customs building. Enrique Berrío, interviewed by the author, 11 September, 2012.

29 ProBarranquilla is Barranquilla and the Departamento del Atlántico’s Investment Promotion Agency. It is a private non-profit organization sponsored by more than 100 companies in the city, with the aim of promoting sustainable economic development in the region. Currently, ProBarranquilla works to encourage domestic and foreign companies to invest in the Departamento del Atlántico. www.probarranquilla.org (accessed 11 September, 2012).

30 The Fondo Mixto de Promociones Turísticas is the governmental agency in charge of promoting tourism in the Departamento del Atlántico.

31 El Heraldo, viernes, enero 10, 1992, 6A.
With an initial capital of 78 million 400 thousand pesos, the society “Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A.” was registered yesterday at the fifth municipal notary. The event was attended by the Mayor, Miguel Bolívar Acuña; the representative of the Chamber of Commerce, Enrique Berrío Mendoza; Mariano Puche, in representation of the Fundación Mario Santo Domingo; Manuel María Marquez, on behalf of the Promotora del Desarrollo del Distrito Central de Barranquilla and Raúl Rivera Molinares, in representation of the Fundación Para el Desarrollo Regional de la Región Caribe Colombiana, Fundacaribe.

The capital will be 39 million 600 thousand pesos represented in shares of $10,000 pesos each, which correspond to a contribution of $20 million from the Municipality of Barranquilla, $5 million from the Chamber of Commerce, as well as $5 million from Fundacaribe, $2 million from ProBarranquilla, $5 million from the Fundación Mario Santo Domingo, $2,400,000 from the Fondo Mixto de Promociones Turísticas, and a paid (private) capital of $19,200,000 pesos.32

The fact that the new corporation was established with enough capital to function independently with the support of the private sector and philanthropic organizations that could vouch for its integrity was certainly an advantage. As sociologist Edgar Rey Sinning indicated, “The Company was created as a result of the need to maintain a permanent body dedicated to its management, control, and marketing, because you have to understand that Carnival has become a sector of the city’s economy (...).”33

The involvement of both the private and the public sectors was necessary to avoid the problems that could develop from the privatization of a festivity that was public. The members of the Board of Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. were carefully chosen with that in mind:

The board is composed of ten people between principals and alternates, most of them representatives of the municipality thus ensuring there will be no privatization of the carnival.

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32 Heberto Amor Beltrán, “Firmada escritura para la Sociedad del Carnaval,” La Libertad, enero 9, 1992, 1A y 10A.

33 Rey Sinning, 1997, 86.
Of the members of the board, three will be congressmen, one will be the mayor or his delegate, one will represent the private sector, and one will represent the Corporación Nacional de Turismo.

The presidency of the board is vested in the person of the mayor or his delegate, and yesterday Paul Tarud was appointed to assume the responsibility of chairing the board of the Corporation that was organized to assure the transparency of the management of King Momo’s festivities.34

The original Board of Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A., which had a strong representation of the municipal government, was soon modified to include a better representation of the company’s shareholders. The articles of incorporation indicated that the board of Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. included representatives from the City of Barranquilla, Barranquilla’s Chamber of Commerce, Fundacaribe, ProBarranquilla, Fundación Mario Santo Domingo, and the Fondo Mixto de Promoción Turística del Atlántico. By including the representation of all sectors, the corporation made it clear that its intention was to function as an inclusive entity that would work for the benefit of the community.35

The participation of Barranquilla’s Chamber of Commerce and the Fundación Mario Santo Domingo was particularly significant. The Chamber of Commerce was not only interested in the potential benefits carnival could bring to its members, but it was also committed to obtaining their financial support. With the participation of the Fundación Mario Santo Domingo, a respected philanthropic organization that was promoting social development in the areas of education and micro financing, Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. gained credibility among community leaders and the popular sector.

34 Amor Beltrán, 10A
35 Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. Estatutos Escritura de Constitución No. 9 del 7 de enero de 1992.
As for the objectives of the new entity, they were literally the same as those established by the Junta Organizadora del Carnaval, in 1942. According to Resolution No. 2911, 1991, “the main objectives of Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. are to promote and to organize Carnival’s official events, to promote tourism, to protect folk traditions, and to publicize Carnival at the national and international levels.”

Following its incorporation on January 1992, Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. organized the official program of the 1992 festivities, which was presented by the Carnival Queen, Brigitte Abuchaibe, and the president of Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A., Paul Tarud, at a press conference that took place at the Hotel Dann, on Wednesday, January 8, 1992. The program included the Toma de la Ciudad, in which the Carnival Queen visited the city’s neighborhoods; the Reading of the Edict; the popular queen’s pageant; the Guacherna, an evening parade; the Tarde de Danzas, a spectacle of popular expressions; the crowning of the Carnival Queen; the Batalla de Flores; the Gran Parada; and Joselito’s Burial. For the first time carnival’s official program incorporated events organized by independent organizations such as the Asociación de Grupos Folclóricos del Atlántico that organized the Noche de Cumbias and the Reconquista. According to journalist, Patricia Escobar, with this program, Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. “put together a popular celebration in which all the residents of Barranquilla would have fun in a healthy way, with spectacles available to all.”

An international beauty pageant was organized to promote carnival as a tourist destination. The idea was not new. The first version of this event had taken place in 1956 with the participation of twelve representatives from Latin America and the Caribbean region. In 1992, it was expanded to twenty candidates from Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Israel,


38 Ibid.
Jamaica, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Puerto Rico, Spain, United States, Uruguay, and Venezuela who participated in the pageant’s official program that culminated with the election of the 1992 International Queen. As a marketing strategy, the pageant was very successful; it attracted not only the candidates and their entourages, but also representatives of national and foreign media who covered all the different aspects of Barranquilla’s carnival celebration.

Twelve journalists from around the country arrived today in Barranquilla to visit places of touristic interest and to attend some of the official Carnival acts. The Hotel del Prado, in coordination with SAM airlines, organized a trip with representatives of the media to promote Barranquilla and especially its carnival.39

Note that this year the number of tourists was higher than the last three years’. The most important reason for this was the great promotion done nationally and internationally.40

In terms of outreach, the coverage of events by the local media, especially television, had a significant impact. Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. coordinated with local companies Star Televisión, Video 76, Galeón TV, and Telecaribe, the live broadcast coverage of some of the most important events, including the Crowning of the Queen, the Batalla de Flores, the Gran Parada, and the Festival de Orquestas y Acordeones.41 The media contracts, awarded through competitive bidding, were given to the different firms that transmitted live the most popular events, not only to local viewers but also to a national audience.

Today, beginning at 9:30 pm, Video 76, in association with Galeón TV, will begin the broadcast live through Telecaribe the crowning of the

39 El Heraldo, viernes, febrero 14, 1992, 8C.
40 El Heraldo, sábado, marzo 7, 1992, 4C.
41 El Heraldo, enero, febrero 10, 1992, 3D.
Carnival Queen, Brigitte Abuchaibe (…). The signal will be sent via microwaves from Video 76’s mobile unit 76 to the entire Atlantic coast. (…) The manager of Video 76, José Bermúdez, also announced that everything is ready for the transmission of the Batalla de Flores and the Gran Parada, on Saturday and Sunday, through Telecaribe. He also confirmed the regional audience will see innovative changes during the transmissions, which will be presented simultaneously to the entire country through the regional television channels -Telepacífico, Telecafé and Teleantioquia-, and Bogota’s channel three, all linked with us to broadcast to their respective areas.42

Television coverage enabled those who were not able to attend the events to enjoy the spirit of the celebration, and provided a viable solution to the lack of space, which by 1992, had become a major issue due to the growth of the city’s population and the arrival of a larger number of tourists. The main events of the Carnaval de Barranquilla were now seen in most towns and cities of the Caribbean region thanks to Telecaribe’s signal. Even those costeños who migrated to the interior, particularly to the country’s capital, were able to enjoy the parades and the concerts thanks to the televised transmissions. Carnival, with its colorful parades, its Caribbean music, and its traditional expressions, had gone beyond the geographical boundaries of the city and had entered the realm of national popular culture.43

In terms of protecting carnival’s popular traditions, Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. assumed the responsibility of supporting the keepers of those traditions by recovering, organizing, and promoting events featuring traditional danzas and popular expressions, and helping them financially and logistically. In addition to providing funds through cash allocations, the new board decided to distribute the carnival’s financial profits to

42 Lizzette Díaz Pérez, “En directo, transmisión de la coronación de Brigitte,” El Heraldo, jueves, febrero 27, 1992, 7C.

43 The impact of the media in the historical development of carnival celebrations in Barranquilla deserves further study.
participating individuals and groups. This was made clear in a statement published in the local newspaper El Heraldo, on February 11, 1992:

The money that we obtain from all the events will be destined to help folkloric groups and individual costumes participating in the festivities. President Paul Tarud announced that the board approved the new measure because ‘it's the only way to get the financial aid that was given this year to all the folkloric groups, both new and traditional.’ The board agreed to give the groups $20 million pesos to help them subsidize the cost of costumes.44

Clearly carnival had begun to regain momentum in the hands of the newly created Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. and expectations were high. Several aspects of the celebration analyzed below proved that the new entity, although not without flaws, was a viable option for the administration of the Carnaval de Barranquilla.

1992 Official Program: Pre-Carnival Season

Carnival de Barranquilla S.A. organized an elaborate program for the 1992 festivities, which included twenty official events that took place during the pre-carnival and carnival seasons. The pre-carnival season began on Friday, January 17, with the “Reading of the Edict,” followed by “Yesteryear’s Edict,” a special event celebrated on Monday, January 20, in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of the election of Lolita Obregón as Carnival Queen.45

Other events of the pre-carnival season included: the Guacherna, an evening parade reminiscent of the evening rehearsals that took place in the nineteenth and early twentieth century;46 the spectacle Noches de Cumbia, dedicated to the Caribbean region’s

44 El Heraldo, martes, febrero 11, 1992, 4C.

45 Ibid.

46 The Guacherna parade was organized for the first time in 1974, under Colombian singer and composer Esther Forero’s initiative. De la Espriella, 2003, 140.
traditional expression; the Children's Carnival, held annually since 1990 to give the new generation its own cultural space and to promote among them carnival’s roots and traditions; the Tarde de Danzas, a spectacle of traditional choreographies; and the Coronation of the winner of the popular queens’ pageant.

Fig. 32. Queen Brigitte crowning Nelsy Balcázar, from the Barrio Las Nieves, winner of the popular queens’ pageant. Photo by Villarreal-Buitrago. El Heraldo, February 27, 1992, 8C.
The crowning ceremony of the popular queen took place in the parking lot of the Hotel del Prado, the hotel’s outdoor-space where dances and concerts took place during the Carnival season. Twenty-three candidates, representing Barranquilla’s neighborhoods, participated in the pageant that culminated with a thematic Hawaiian spectacle sponsored by Janna Licores. A jury formed by representatives of the city’s consular corps elected Nelsy Balcázar from the Barrio Las Nieves as carnival’s popular queen. The verdict was well received by five thousand people who attended the event. According to journalist Patricia Escobar, Balcázar epitomized the natural beauty of the women from Barranquilla: “The new popular queen is a statuesque eighteen year old brunette, who studies high school and has beautiful long black hair that contrasts with her perfect white teeth. Since she signed up to participate in the popular pageant, she won everybody’s heart and was considered one of the favorites.”

Unlike the first popular queen pageant, which took place in 1942 and was hardly mentioned by the press, the crowning of the 1992 popular queen was acknowledged in a full-page article illustrated with three color photographs followed by a profile of Nelsy Balcázar published the following day in El Heraldo. The photograph that illustrates the moment the popular queen is crowned by the official Carnival Queen, Brigitte Abuchaibe, provides interesting information (Fig. 32). Both girls are beautiful, but one has a more European look while the other is a mulata. Balcázar is dressed with the Hawaiian attire used for the choreography presented during the event, and Abuchaibe

47 Patricia Escobar, “La reina popular, una exótica morena que este año se graduara de bachiller,” El Heraldo, jueves, febrero 27, 1992, 8C.

wears a stylized version of the pollera, decorated with the colors of Barranquilla’s flag, and matching silk hibiscus flowers on her head. At least in the popular setting of the popular queen’s crowning ceremony, the Carnival Queen identified herself with the folklore and the symbols of Barranquilla and its culture.

An interesting detail in the photograph is the presence of a uniformed policeman behind them. Although it is customary for beauty queens to be escorted by officers from the navy or the army, the gentleman is a police officer who was probably hired to secure the safety of the ladies on stage. Security was a major concern in those days, since assassinations, kidappings, and bombings, were part of everyday life, even during carnival times.  

Finally, it is interesting to note the Las Vegas style bright lights sign of Ron Blanco featured in the background of the stage. As the newspaper article indicated, Janna Licores, a local liquor distributor representing the brand was the official sponsor of the popular queen beauty pageant.


50 Patricia Escobar, “La reina popular, una exótica morena que este año se graduara de bachiller,” El Heraldo, jueves, febrero 27, 1992, 8C.
Brigitte Abuchaibe’s crowning ceremony took place at the Estadio Metropolitano, on Thursday, 27 February, 1992, at 7:30 pm. As in previous years, this location was
chosen to promote the attendance of spectators from the popular classes. The event was sponsored by Cerveza Águila, a local beer brand produced by Colombia’s conglomerate Bavaria S.A. Tickets to the event sold for $2,500 pesos general seating and $3,500 pesos for assigned seats. Originally the event was free to the public, but Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. decided to charge an entry fee. The general public was not pleased with this decision and complained that the new organization was taking advantage of the public that wanted to be part of the celebration. The organizers responded to the claims by indicating that prices were affordable and charging an entrance fee allowed them to control the attendance. Note the ad promoting the event was sponsored by the most popular beer brand among the working classes, Cerveza Águila. The ad also featured the logo of Avianca, showing that fifty years later the airline continued to support the promotion of the Carnaval de Barranquilla as a tourist destination.
The crowning ceremony was documented with a half-page full-color photograph printed on the first page of Friday’s edition of El Heraldo (Fig. 35). The photo’s credit provided a brief description of the event:

Carnival president, Paul Tarud, crowned the Carnival Queen, Brigitte Abuchaibe Abuchaibe, last night, amid a lavish ceremony at the Estadio Metropolitano Roberto Meléndez, attended by more than ten thousand people who cheered the Queen, who looked splendid with the beautiful dress designed by Amalín de Hazbún, and further demonstrated her skills
as an excellent dancer, when, accompanied by members of the Ballet de Colombia, danced with delight the *punta* dance. The show, directed by Sonia Osorio, whose ballet presented a musical journey throughout the American Caribbean, also featured the Grupo Niche from Cali, who again stole the applause from the audience.51

The photograph shows carnival’s president, Paul Tarud, at the moment he puts a large and elaborate crown on the Queen’s head. The close-up image shows the details of the lavish and richly decorated gown worn by Abuchaibe. The dress, the crown, and the jewels worn by the Queen contrasted sharply with the Hawaiian costume worn by the popular queen on the day of her coronation, a clear example of the extreme economic and social differences that characterize Barranquilla’s society.

The image also illustrates the fact that when it comes to carnival, Barranquilla’s society is extremely fond of traditions. As always, the male authority figure symbolically passed the ruling rights to the Queen in front of an audience that included both the elite and the popular classes, except in this case, for the first time since 1942, it was not the mayor but the president of the board who performed the ceremony due to the fact that Mayor Miguel Bolívar Acuña declined the invitation to avoid being booed by the public as he had been the previous year.52

There were some significant differences between the 1942 and the 1992 crowning ceremonies. Since no theatre could hold the number of spectators expected to attend the celebration, Abuchaibe’s crowning ceremony took place in the city’s soccer stadium. It was no longer a theatre, the “temple of elite culture” but rather the stadium, “temple of popular entertainment,” that served as setting for the crowning ceremony. The change


and the choice of setting was very symbolic: the celebration was no longer an elite event to which the popular classes were invited, but a popular festivity that took place in the most popular public scenario, the Junior de Barranquilla’s soccer stadium.

The program also reflected significant changes. Instead of featuring seventeenth century French music and classical poetry, the 1992 ceremony featured choreographies inspired by regional popular expressions performed by the Ballet de Sonia Osorio and a concert by Colombian salsa group, Grupo Niche. The program included a performance by the Carnival Queen dancing to provocative African inspired rhythms, and illustrated a major shift not only in terms of the local community’s taste and identity, but also in terms of moral standards.
Fig. 35. Carnival Queen Brigitte Abuchaibe dancing the *punta* rhythm during the crowning ceremony. El Heraldo, Saturday, February 29, 1992, 1C.

The photograph of the Carnival Queen wearing a short ruffled silver body suit, taken from below the stage, while dancing to the rhythm of Banda Blanca’s popular song *Sopa de Caracol*, contrasts drastically with the Queens’ images of earlier years. Even though she still represents the elite, Abuchaibe’s choice of attire and the fact she danced to a rhythm inspired by African roots illustrate how, by the early 1990s, popular culture
had permeated all levels of society and how the elite had embraced African and Indigenous popular expressions, not only from Colombia, but also from Latin America and the Caribbean. This was particularly true during carnival celebrations when the Carnival Queen was expected to be not only a good dancer, but also an expert in traditional rhythms. Abuchaibe’s performance at the crowning ceremony proved she was ready to assume her role and to celebrate with the people of Barranquilla with passion and lots of energy.

The angle in which this image was taken allowed the photographer to show the ease of Abuchaibe’s movements and the joy she transmitted at the time of the presentation. It also illustrated the sensual, almost erotic movements of the dance she performed, and depicted the Carnival Queen as a sex symbol without falling into the provocative images of Brazilian *garotas*, whose carnival attires are very revealing.

**Batalla de Flores**

The 1992 Carnaval de Barranquilla opened its official program with the traditional Batalla de Flores on carnival Saturday, which for the second year in a row took place at the Cumbiódromo, a temporary stage built along the Vía 40, modeled after Rio de Janeiro’s Sambodrome. From Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A.’s perspective, the Cumbiódromo provided a solution to the increasing need to accommodate large crowds and constituted a significant source of income and jobs. Each *palco* offered food, drinks, live music and the convenience of watching the parades from the stands. For those who could not afford the *palcos*, there was still the option of watching the parade in the open areas of the street or seating on the *bordillos* (curbside), but with the proliferation of *palcos* these became scarce.
Fourteen palcos (enclosed covered bleachers) were set in strategic places of the Vía 40 to accommodate hundreds of thousands of people. The palcos became a center of a controversy because people were used to seeing the parade for free and ticket prices which were not regulated were not affordable for all. Palcos were assigned by bids and each licensee was allowed to determine the entry fee. The Palco La Marimonda, for example, charged $8,950 pesos for adults and $4,990 pesos for children. An ad published in El Heraldo specified that the amount included $2,450 pesos in taxes for the adults and $2,090 pesos for children.\(^{53}\)

Compared to the prices of the products of the “canasta familiar,” ticket prices were higher than the cost of items such as milk ($250.00 pesos per 1,000 c.c.), beef, ($1,320 pesos per pound); rice ($145 pesos per pound), or vegetable oil ($610 pesos per 1,000 c.c.).\(^{54}\) Even aguardiente, that cost anywhere between $1,620 and $2,128 pesos at local supermarkets, was much cheaper that the cost of the palco’s individual ticket. Clearly palcos were not affordable for all and established a division between those who could afford paying to view the parade from the bleachers and those who could not.

Curiously, it was not the prices of the palcos that triggered the discontent among carnival participants, but the fact that Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. disregarded an unwritten agreement among the danzas, comparsas and individuals in costumes regarding the order of appearance in carnival parades. The situation caused a major setback a few days prior to the celebration of the Batalla de Flores, when representatives of 147 danzas, cumbiambas, comparsas, and individual costumes, announced they would

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\(^{53}\) *El Heraldo*, jueves, febrero 27, 1992, 8D.

\(^{54}\) “Precios de la canasta familiar.” *El Heraldo*, viernes 28 de febrero, 1992, 4 A.
not participate in the official carnival parades due to disagreements with the representatives of Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A.

Visibly upset, members of the 147 danzas, cumbiambas, comparsas, and individual costumes came in at night to the facilities of this newspaper to express their protest against the treatment they have been receiving from the new leaders of the mixed economy company Carnival de Barranquilla S.A., who did not attend a meeting to which they had been invited that afternoon, to try to define aspects of their participation in both parades.

“It is not the first time this happens, because on several occasions they have left us waiting. Today, after two hours of waiting, we decided in an assembly, that we will not participate in the events of Carnival that will take place at the Vía 40-Batalla de Flores and Gran Parada, and conversely, we will do our parade at the carrera 43 until the calle 72, as it was previously done,” said Carlos Master, member of the danza El Toro Grande.

(...) In particular they are protesting the way in which the order of participation is determined for both parades, which according to them, is done ‘finger picked by political influence or family relation, benefiting some groups over others regardless of the antiquity or tradition of some of them. They do not want to discuss with us some things, but rather to impose their decisions,’ they said.

They also protested because ‘they have not given out the financial aid to some comrades, both for dances and costumes, which is why many of them have not been able to claim their costumes from the seamstresses, because they cannot pay,’ explained Erlinda Tapias, a member of Cumbia Brava.55

The board of Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. learned early on that simply imposing its criteria upon the popular groups was not a good idea. Not only were they aware that without them there would be no parades, but they also showed that they were able to organize themselves to make what they considered valid demands. In the end, a mutual agreement led to their participation in the two official parades as originally planned and

55 “Por desacuerdos con directivos, grupos folclóricos amenazan con no desfilar en Carnaval,” El Heraldo, jueves, febrero 27, 1992, 3C.
most important, the situation set the tone for the existence of a permanent dialogue between the organizers and the keepers of the popular traditions.

It is interesting to note the confidence with which the popular classes defied Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. Not only were they aware of the benefits of uniting forces but they also used their position of power to demand a dialogue with the corporation’s board. This unifying strategy was not new to them. Most carnavaleros belonged to a working class that had a long tradition of joining forces to fight for its rights. Barranquilla was one of the first cities in the country to have labor unions. With the city’s industrial boom came the development of a work force that found in organized unions and other organizations the best strategy to fight for salaries and benefits as early as the 1920s. The city’s elite learned very early that when united the popular classes could be in a position of power, which is why they developed strategies to keep them divided. This was particularly true during carnival times when, according to Friedemann, the elite organized contests among individuals and groups from the popular classes to create competition among them and to discourage a united front.56

What many of the traditional groups objected to prior to the Batalla de Flores in 1992, was that the place to which each group was assigned in the parade was determined by the results of the previous year’s competition and not by legacy. Instead of receiving cash prizes, the winners of the 1991 contests had been given the honor of coming out first in the 1992 parade. That explained why some of the newer groups, particularly the winners of the comparas de fantasía, including African inspired dances such as África Insólita, Gran Ñera, Fanfarrias de Carnaval, Ventoleras de Carnaval, and Congos Dorados del Ciclón del Norte, were going to be featured at the very beginning of the

56 Friedemann, 1985, 21.
Batalla de Flores. Traditional groups were upset at the changes because they were accustomed to a different system that benefited those who had participated in carnival parades for many years, even decades, but more important, because their opinion was not considered at the time of making those changes. Although in the end they agreed to follow the new system, they made it clear that in the future, Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. would have to communicate with them and consider their opinion when making decisions in regards to issues related to the participation of traditional groups in carnival events.

By 1992, the Batalla de Flores had become a massive affair with the participation of more than 50,000 people, including children, adults, and the elderly, who paraded

Fig. 36. General view of the Batalla de Flores, featuring the Carnival Queen’s float (1992). Photographer unknown. Archivo Brigitte Abuchaibe. Courtesy of Edwin Padilla.
along four kilometers of the Vía 40. The committee in charge of its organization, led by Enrique Vengoechea, divided the participants into blocks or groups, led by floats and followed by *danzas*, costumes, and *comparsas*. National Police motorcycles opened the parade, following a tradition that went back to the early versions of the Batalla de Flores. Also at the front was the children’s Comparsa Mestizaje, in recognition of the children’s role as future keepers of popular traditions. Interestingly, the name of the group illustrates one of the greatest assets of carnival, its multi-ethnic roots.

It was precisely these multi-ethnic roots and the way they were expressed in the different cultural expressions that caught the attention of the spectators and the press that, unlike fifty years earlier, covered their participation as one of the highlights of the event. By the end of the twentieth century, *danzas* and *comparsas* had become the essence of carnival’s celebrations and were documented through photographs and articles published in the local newspapers. Following the order in which they appeared during the Batalla de Flores, the most authentic and traditional carnival expressions will be described and analyzed below.

The Batalla de Flores parade, scheduled to begin at 1 pm, featured individual costumes, *danzas*, *comparsas*, traditional groups, floats, and musical groups that entertained the public who gathered from the calle 80 to the Estadio Tomás Arrieta. Group A began with the Marimondas de Barrio Abajo, followed by the floats of the popular queens led by the winner of the carnival’s popular queen pageant Nelsy Balcázar. For the first time in the history of the Batalla de Flores, the float of the Carnival Queen

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58 Ibid.
did not lead the parade, following the police and the opening group. Even though the organizers indicated they wanted to emphasize the popular character of the celebration, others suggested the Carnival Queen wanted to come at a later time to make sure everyone had arrived by the time she passed.

Either way, the goal of emphasizing the popular character of the celebration was certainly achieved by choosing the Marimondas as the opening group. According to César “Paragüita” Morales, founder and director of the Marimondas de Barrio Abajo, the Marimonda costume was invented by a “resentido” (resentful), “mamador de gallo” (joker), who took the opportunity to get even with the authorities during carnival times. He was very poor and lacked the means to buy a costume so he wore an old jacket backwards, old trousers and a very large tie, symbolizing the corrupt politicians that had existed at all times. To hide his identity he put socks on his hands and covered his head with a mask made out of a pillowcase, to which he added two large cardboard ears he used to write complaints and attacks on the authorities. Protruding eyes and nose, a long phallic one, made the costume very grotesque. The man added the famous whistle that emits the repellent “pea–pea” (fart) sound and a stick to beat those who dared to touch his nose or ears. Because of his vulgar and disrespectful attitude the original Marimonda was put in jail, and the costume disappeared until many decades later in 1983, when “Paragüita” brought it back as a comparsa, honoring the originality of the creator but giving it a more “elegant” look.59

By 1992, the Marimonda had become a carnival symbol representing the identity of the barranquillero, “happy, recochero, mamador de gallo…” and, although it no

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longer served as a channel for political criticism and vulgar expressions, its presence served as a testimony of the rebellious spirit of the popular classes.

Fig. 37. *Marimondas pea-pea*, one of the traditional costumes of the Carnaval de Barranquilla. *El Heraldo*, Saturday, February 29, 1992, 7 A.

Going back to the 1992 parade, group B, which included the winners of the 1991 *comparsas de fantasía* contest, was followed by group C, featuring the floats of the *capitanas* of the private clubs, the Club Campestre, the Club Caujaral, and the Club Alemán, which reopened after World War II. Group C represented what Friedemann called the “*elitelore,*” the representation of folklore by members of the elite. By participating in the parade and sponsoring expensive floats, the social clubs shared the carnival experience with the popular classes and enriched the event with beautifully decorated vehicles. The participation of the captains of the *comparsas* of the private clubs illustrated carnival’s inversive nature both in terms of social classes and spatial divisions.

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60 It is customary for private clubs to organize carnival *comparsas* led by female members known as *Capitanas*. The *comparsas* are performed at the club’s private balls during the pre-carnival season. In 1992, *Capitanas* paraded in the Batalla de Flores riding the clubs’ sponsored floats.
Club members paraded with the traditional *danzas* and *comparsas*, and shared with them the spirit of the celebration.

At the Batalla de Flores, they were followed by the most representative groups of the popular classes, the winners of the 1991 *cumbiambas* contest, La Revoltosa, Cumbión de Oro, La Arenosa, and Cumbión Costeño, (group D), the floats of some of the candidates to the National Beauty Pageant and a special float celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Universidad Autónoma del Caribe. This was an interesting mix as it illustrated the diversity represented at the parade.

The *cumbiambas* represented a regional popular expression that by 1992 had been adopted as a national symbol. Its origins dated back to colonial times, when slaves and free blacks celebrated during Catholic religious celebrations by dancing to the rhythms of beating drums. Indigenous people, belonging to the same social class, contributed to the dance with their own melodious sounds played with *gaitas* and flutes. The Spanish influence was also present in the dance through the attire and the dance’s movements which symbolized the appropriate courtship behavior from a European point of view. Scholars agree that the *Cumbia* dance constitutes a tri-ethnic expression and a testimony of a historical process that occurred during the colonial period. It eventually made its appearance in carnival parades and with time it became one of the most representative symbols of Colombia’s Caribbean coast folklore.

It is important to note that by 1992 the *Cumbia* had been transformed to participate in carnival parades. In addition to losing its original ritual meaning, it had adapted its choreography to moving forward rather than dancing in circles, as it was originally done. Notwithstanding these changes, *cumbiambas* continued to have a strong
presence in popular celebrations and a very special meaning among the *cumbiamberos* who felt extremely proud of their ancestry.

Fig. 38. Brigitte Abuchaibe, Carnival Queen. Batalla de Flores, 1992. El Heraldo, Wednesday, March 4, 1992, 1 A.
Group F presented the Carnival Queen and her court, accompanied by a special group which celebrated the 500 years of Columbus’ arrival in America, and a live band. The photograph shows the Queen riding an elaborate float decorated with fresh yellow roses and Renaissance Italian-style fountains, which illustrate how European models continued to inspire Barranquilla’s elite at the end of the twentieth century (Fig. 38). At the back of the float a band performed live music -notice the man in a yellow shirt playing a wind instrument, probably a trumpet. Parading accompanied by bands was a luxury not all popular groups could afford. Most of those groups danced to the music played through loud speakers -“picós”- carried by motorized vehicles.

The float was heavily escorted by police. Notice the officer walking on the left of the Queen’s float, the one behind him riding a motorcycle, and the two in the back carrying the Colombian and the Barranquilla flags, symbolizing the patriotic spirit maintained during the celebration. Security was a major issue at the time judging by the local newspaper’s headlines in those days: “Two bombs explode in urban buses. ELN claims responsibility.”61 “Riot against poor public services: Town Hall and Registry burned in Puerto Colombia. Power plant and police station were also burned.”62 “The war against the narcos admits no truce: says the Ministry of Justice.”63 Carnival was particularly meaningful during the 1990s because it gave people a break from the violence that seemed to permeate Colombian life; it was a true inversion of daily life,

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62 “Motín contra los servicios públicos. Incendiados la alcaldía y el registro en Puerto Colombia. La planta de energía y la estación de policía también fueron incendiadas,” El Heraldo, martes, febrero 25, 1992, 1 A.

63 “La guerra contra los Narcos no admite tregua: dice el Ministerio de Justicia,” El Heraldo, martes, febrero 25, 1992, 12 A.
which at the time was characterized by terrorism and economic and political turmoil. The celebrations were a welcome escape, a time for dancing, playing and drinking, a time for forgetting for a short period of time the difficulties that all, rich and poor, experienced due to crises befalling the country.

Fig. 39. The Cipote Garabato led by Leopoldo Klee, Batalla de Flores. El Heraldo, Thursday, March 5, 1992, 4C.

The Carnival Queen’s float was followed by the traditional danzas El Torito, Cipote Garabato, Congo Grande, Bambazú, and Toro Grande de Rebolo. The photograph depicts members from the traditional dance of the Carnaval de Barranquilla, the Garabato (Fig. 39). Its plot represents the fight between life and death, a universal carnival symbol. The dance is named after the garabato, a wooden hook used by peasants from the Caribbean coast to pull the grass that is cut with a machete. Within the context of
carnival, the hook is also associated with the scythe held by the character representing death.64

Contrary to what occurs in all carnival dances and theatrical representations of the fight between life and death, in the Garabato dance, life triumphs over death. This is extremely unusual but not surprising as barranquilleros are known for having the drive to overcome personal difficulties and in this case, at least symbolically, they can even defeat death.65 You might want to once again refer to the dark context in which this was taking place as this dance symbolized hope in the midst of death and despair.

The last six groups of the 1992 Batalla de Flores, led by the candidate for the Departamento del Atlántico to the National Beauty Pageant, Martha Abdallah Pastrana, featured the floats of the eighteen participants of the Carnival’s International Beauty Pageant (two of them were not present), escorted by cumbiambas, including La Sabrosa, El Gallo Giro, el Cañonazo, Cipote Vaina, el Gran Carajo, Banco de Colombia, Aluminio Reynolds, Del Carajo, and Cumbiamberos de Miami. The presence of so many cumbiambas in the second half of the parade illustrates the popularity of the Cumbia among the members of the popular classes, making it the most represented popular manifestation from Colombia’s Caribbean region in the celebration of the Carnaval de Barranquilla.

Cumbiambas were organized not only by residents of popular neighborhoods, but also by co-workers from factories and businesses (Aluminio Reynolds and Banco de Colombia) and friends who lived abroad and returned on a yearly basis to Barranquilla to

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64 Proclamation of the Carnaval de Barranquilla as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity-UNESCO, 83.

65 For a description of the Garabato dance see Appendix.
participate in the festivities. The Batalla de Flores, which lasted five hours, ended with a group of mounted police officers carrying flags of the city of Barranquilla, a clear sign of government interest and patriotic pride.

According to the organizers, the parade was very successful, particularly from the financial perspective. One of the proofs that Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. was able to get the support of the private sector was the fact that each of the floats was sponsored by a private organization. Liquor companies, including Janna Licores, Cervecería Águila, and Concrystal sponsored some of the floats of the popular queens, which is not surprising since a significant percentage of their annual income is earned during the carnival festivities when alcohol is consumed in excess. Other sponsors included supermarkets Vivero, Sao and Olímpica and local industries such as Monómeros, Cementos del Caribe and Frigoríficos de la Costa. Financial institutions including Davivienda, Bancolombia, Banco de Occidente and Banco de Bogotá were instrumental in financing Carnival’s International Pageant, as well as some of the floats featured in the Batalla de Flores.

From these sponsorships and the advertising banners that covered the path of the parade it was obvious that Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. had received the economic support of the private sector needed to cover the expenses of the multitudinous spectacle, including the $10,029 million pesos spent on the Batalla de Flores and the Gran Parada.66

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Gran Parada

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The second major event of the season, the Gran Parada, took place at the Vía 40, on Carnival Sunday. Organized for the first time in 1967 to include the growing number of traditional groups that could not be featured in the Batalla de Flores, it became the festivities’ second largest parade.\textsuperscript{67} Led by the Carnival Queen, Brigitte Abuchaibe dressed in a costume inspired by the traditional Danza El Torito, the 1992 Gran Parada featured an astounding two hundred and fifteen groups. In addition to the traditional \textit{danzas}, \textit{cumbiambas}, and \textit{comparsas}, the parade included dance schools, \textit{letanías}, and individuals in costume. The participation of different traditional groups provided a testimony of their strong presence in Colombia’s Caribbean culture.

According to journalist Fabiola Osorio, the Gran Parada was going to be “the most authentic event of the most traditional Colombian festivity, where at least fifty thousand dancers from three to seventy years old would show that the Carnaval de Barranquilla is an original party, unmatched in the country and all of South America.”\textsuperscript{68} Her comment supports the fact that this event had become a living testimony of Barranquilla and Colombia’s Caribbean coast traditions including, among others, the \textit{Danzas de Congo}.

\textsuperscript{67} De la Espriella, 2003, 120.

The *Danza de Congo*, the most popular dance of the Carnaval de Barranquilla, has its origins in ancient African *Cabildos* where it was performed during colonial times.\(^6^9\) It was brought to Barranquilla by the descendants of enslaved African who migrated to the city in the nineteenth century attracted by its economic growth. The dance was originally performed exclusively by men wearing the traditional *Congo* costume,\(^7^0\) moving in pairs in a single file (*conga*), accompanied by men dressed in animal costumes. In the twentieth century, men dressed as women, transvestites, and women were allowed to join them.

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\(^6^9\) Cited in *Proclamation of the Carnaval de Barranquilla as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity*, 68.

\(^7^0\) For a detailed description of the *Congo* costume see Appendix.
The Congo dance is a warrior dance inspired by African traditions. From an ethnic perspective, it shows how close members of the popular classes, mostly descendants of enslaved African, feel toward their roots and culture of their ancestors. The dance is also a symbol of their cultural triumph over the Spaniards and criollos, and in contemporary terms, over the elite. During carnival celebrations the Congo dance becomes a symbol of the festivities and gives its members, particularly those with Afro-Colombian roots, symbolic power and recognition.

Fig. 41. Letanías, Gran Parada. El Heraldo, Wednesday, March 4, 1992, 5C.

Another unique expression of the Carnaval de Barranquilla featured in the Gran Parada was the letanía, “an oral tradition inherited from their ancestors, through which the barranquilleros managed to unleash their imagination, creativity and spark, and to approach with humor even the most difficult situations of everyday life.”71 Of all the groups that participate in contemporary parades, the letanías are the ones who most

71 “Las letanías; la chispa del barranquillero en Carnaval,” El Heraldo, miércoles, febrero 26, 1992, 4 C.
directly interact with the public as they stop along the way to recite their critical rhymes and make everybody laugh. Written and recited by letaneros who roam the streets of Barranquilla during carnival times, these verses are integral parts of the celebration. Their authors take advantage of the fact that during carnival there is total freedom of expression to denounce political and social issues and to comment on current events.

Because the letanías are an oral tradition, there are few written records of the many verses that have been written over the years. What we do have is a selection of verses from the groups Lengua Mocha de Montecristo and Ánimas Rojas de Rebolo published by the local newspaper, El Heraldo, which illustrate the critical attitude of the authors towards contemporary issues. An example of the verses reads as follows:

Es un caso exorbitante  
en Santo Tomás no es ni raro  
tiene 30,000 habitantes  
y aparecen 90,000 zonificados  
Barranquilla va creciendo  
como crece un palo de coco  
cada año que va cayendo  
la ciudad tiene más locos.72

It is an outrageous case  
Santo Tomas is not uncommon  
it has 30,000 inhabitants  
and 90,000 are accounted for  
Barranquilla grows  
as a growing coconut palm tree  
each year that falls  
the city has more crazy people.

This letanía from the group Lengua Mocha de Montecristo criticizes that not only the city’s continued to experience demographic growth despite the fact that it no longer provided jobs or basic services, and also that the census was manipulated for political

72 Ibid.
purposes. By changing the number of inhabitants of the Santo Tomás neighborhood in the official census records, politicians were able to manipulate the number of votes and/or the funds allocated for specific purposes, which most likely ended in the hands of unscrupulous people who stole them.

*Letaneros* get their inspiration from personal experiences and from the local, national, and international scene. Their verses are testimonies of their times, oral histories written from the perspective of the popular classes. *Letanías* are always critical and filled with humor. Some of them have sexual overtones that border the grotesque. These characteristics are in tune with Bakhtin’s carnival theory which includes ritual spectacles, comic verbal compositions and offensive language, making these unique cultural manifestations of the Carnaval de Barranquilla the perfect example of the ideal *carnavalesque* expression.

Fig. 42. *Cumbiamba infantil*, Gran Parada. El Heraldo, Wednesday, March 4, 1992, 1 A.

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73 Bakhtin, 1984.
One of the highlights of the 1992 Gran Parada was the presence of several children’s groups featuring the younger generation of *carnavaleros*. Energetic elderly groups followed them, including many octogenarian dancers full of life and passion. The dominant rhythm in the Gran Parada was the *Cumbia*, performed not only by the children depicted in the photograph above (Fig. 42), but also by over forty percent of the groups, making it the most popular tradition represented in carnival parades.

As it was previously mentioned, the *Cumbia*’s tri-ethnic origins go back to colonial times when slaves and free blacks celebrated by dancing in a circle to the rhythm of beating drums.74 Today, the *Cumbia* constitutes not only a tri-ethnic expression and a testimony of a historical process that occurred during the colonial period, but also a contemporary cultural manifestation that preserves the tradition of the popular classes’ ancestors and serves as a bond and a source of pride for the members of the *cumbiambas*.

By 1992, the Carnaval de Barranquilla had become “a converging cultural space of the Indo-American, European and African cultures, which fused in a process of cultural syncretism, gave as a result different cultural manifestations of traditional and popular character expressed within it.”75 Despite having been transformed into a commercial spectacle, carnival served as the keeper of the rich cultural expressions of the popular classes. As Friedemann predicted, the divisiveness of the competitions forged the development of new groups and the strengthening of the old ones. Old and new groups have maintained carnival traditions alive over the years.76 Furthermore, the multiplication

74 Cited in *Proclamation of the Carnaval de Barranquilla as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity*, 90.


76 Friedemann, 1985, 21.
of groups has stimulated new elements of social cohesion among their members that inspires a sense of common identity. Financially, the increasing number of groups boosted the development of micro-enterprises and home-based businesses related to the production of costumes and accessories, and the proliferation of dance schools. From a cultural perspective, popular culture was embraced as a main component of regional and national identities.

**Festival de Orquestas y Acordeones**

The third major event of the official carnival program, and one of the most successful according to the press, was the Festival de Orquestas y Acordeones, a two-day concert featuring forty musical groups competing for the Congo de Oro awards. Originally created in 1969 by entrepreneurs Arturo López Viñas and Alberto Carbonell, the festival had its origins in a popular music festival directed by singer and composer José “Pepe” Molina and included international bands and local groups that performed autochthonous rhythms such as *vallenatos, puyas* and *fandangos*.

Over the years, as the festival featured national and foreign bands competing in different categories, it attained international recognition and became a coveted scenario for tropical music and Caribbean rhythms. In 1992, approximately twenty thousand...

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77 Zoraida Noriega, “Festival de orquestas y acordeones. Lo mejor de la música nacional y el debut de grupos extranjeros,” *El Heraldo*, sábado, febrero 29, 1992, 4C.

78 Bassi and Solano Alonso, 115.

79 The winners of the first place in each category were as follows: Binomio de Oro, *vallenato*; Oscar de León, international band; Son Cartagena, folkloric group; Pocho Pérez, *combo*; and Los Inéditos, national band. According to an article published in *El Heraldo*, the choice in the *vallenato* category “was received with catcalls because for the third year in a row the prize was not awarded to the public’s favorite, Diomedes Díaz.” A subsequent article indicated that overall, the public was in disagreement with all the awards, except for the one given to Los Inéditos. Zoraida Noriega. “Festival de orquestas y acordeones. Lo mejor de la música nacional y el debut de grupos extranjeros.” *El Heraldo*, sábado, febrero 29, 1992, 4C.
people witnessed the festival live and hundreds of thousands watched it on TV. Bands and ensembles played on Monday and Shrove Tuesday, from 10 am to 7 pm at the Estadio Romelio Martínez, in a spectacle that positioned Barranquilla as a major international center for the promotion of Latin music.

The press highlighted the presence of international bands that participated in the festival for the first time including Banda Blanca from Honduras, the Orquesta Aragón from Cuba, and Puerto Rico's Alex León, as well as other famous groups competing for the Congo de Oro in the category of international band including Wilfrido Vargas and Los Hermanos Rosario from Dominican Republic.80 Like the queens in the International Beauty Pageant, the participation of international celebrities in the Festival de Orquestas y Acordeones attracted tourists and media coverage, fulfilling some of the main goals of Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A., “to promote tourism and to publicize carnival at the national and international levels.”81

The festival became an important source of income for Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. For the first time in the history of the event, the public had to pay an entrance fee to attend. Critics expressed their displeasure with the fact they had to pay and with the prices of the individual tickets they had to purchase: upper boxes, $12,000 pesos; lower boxes, $10,000; shade, $3,500; sun, $1,500; and grass area, $5,000.82 The boxes had higher prices because they included other perks such as “exclusive entrance and exit –no

80 Ibid.
81 Resolución No. 2911 de 1991.
82 Ibid.
waiting on line to get in and out of the crowded stadium-, special food and beverage services, and additional surveillance.\textsuperscript{83}

Like the prices of the \textit{palcos} at the Cumbiódromo, the festival’s ticket prices determined who attended the event. People’s purchasing power determined where they were located, how close from the stage they would be and how comfortable they would be during the concert. Those purchasing cheaper tickets would watch the concert without any shade and in very hot conditions. Members of the popular classes filled the stadium occupying the low-price ticket sections while members of the elite class and tourists attended the festival in the more comfortable areas creating a clear division between the two groups.

Sociologist Edgar Rey Sinning, considered the Festival de Orquestas, the highest level of “capitalization” and commercialization of what was once a popular festivity for the enjoyment of all:

\textit{(...)} but the tentacles of capital do not stay there, they invented another enclosed show for those who can pay: the Festival de Orquestas, sponsored by record companies interested in promoting their exclusive artists. \textit{(...)} The company Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. is responsible for organizing this competition. The event, which took place on one day, now takes place during two consecutive days. The competition includes the following categories: bands (national and international), \textit{combos}, and \textit{vallenato} ensembles \textit{-for several years this competition was done separately due to the commercial boom of the music. Once the presentations take place, the coveted “Congo de Oro” is awarded to those who obtain the highest places in each category. There have been many adverse comments toward this event, precisely because of its competitive nature and interests that exist within the contest. This is understandable if one considers that the record companies have money invested in the records produced for the participating groups: winning a \textit{Congo} represents huge profits. Initially the idea was that orchestras and other groups would perform for the public that could not see them at the \textit{casetas} or the social clubs due to the high cost, as a generous act from the organizers to the

\textsuperscript{83} \textit{El Heraldo}, jueves, febrero 27, 1992, 1C.
popular sectors. This event is now organized on Monday and Tuesday, and can only be attended by those who manage to get a ticket, or those who have enough money to buy one resold. The truth is that in these shows is where we find the supremacy of commercial interests over others.\textsuperscript{84}

As Rey Sinning indicated, the Festival de Orquestas y Acordeones was no longer a popular event for all to enjoy but a clearly profitable event. According to Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A.’s financial report, the final production cost of the festival in 1992 was $42,873 million pesos and the total income was $74,892 million pesos, which means the festival brought a profit of $32,019 million pesos.\textsuperscript{85} Although the profit was not distributed among Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A.’s shareholders, but served to increase the corporation’s capital and the amount of grants distributed among the participating groups, the nature of the event had been modified to serve a modern goal: to entertain the masses (both live and through Telecaribe), and to produce some income to assure the continuation of carnival as a commercial spectacle.

If at the Batalla de Flores and the Gran Parada the lower classes complained they were left with very limited space to watch the parades, at the Festival de Orquestas y Acordeones, they felt totally left out. Only people able to purchase tickets, twenty thousand individuals mostly from the middle and upper classes and tourists, could enjoy two days of non-stop music. Contrary to the original participatory nature of carnival celebrations, the festival had become an exclusive event, a show for a few, and not for all. Despite having the potential to accommodate 40,000 people, only 20,000 attended due to the cost of the tickets. The transmission of the two-day program through Telecaribe allowed Barranquilla’s popular classes and the residents of the major Colombian cities to

\textsuperscript{84} Rey Sinning, 1997, 63-64.

enjoy the concert, but watching it on T.V. did not have the same effect as watching and enjoying the concerts live.

Joselito’s Burial

The official program of the carnival season ended with the burial of Joselito, perhaps the most “carnavalesque”\(^{86}\) of all the Carnaval de Barranquilla events. It is customary for **barranquilleros** to participate in the symbolic funeral of carnival, impersonated by Joselito Carnaval, which takes place on the eve of Ash Wednesday. This spontaneous theatrical representation reminds people of the religious origins of the celebration. With the death of carnival begins the period of Lent, a time of prayer and modesty that contrasts with the previous four days of non-stop play and physical enjoyment.

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\(^{86}\) *Carnivalesque* is “the removal and escape from social calculations through a variety of costuming and behavioral modes including inversion.” Kinser, 47.
This photograph of the Carnival Queen features some of the traditional characters present in Joselito’s burial including men dressed as female widows, in the traditional carnival cross-dressing way; \textit{rezanderas}, women praying for the soul of the deceased; a man in a priest costume giving Joselito the extreme unction (only his hands holding a prayer book and a rosary can be seen on the left); and Joselito himself, represented by a man in the white shirt, usually carried on a stretcher or a coffin. Other characters that participate in the charade, but are not depicted in the photograph, are doctors and nurses trying to save Joselito’s life, and children complaining about the fact he will no longer be around to pay the bills.

It is customary for the mocking funerary procession to display posters like those posted on the streets of many Colombian cities to inform the neighbors about the details of the funeral of the deceased, except Joselito’s posters are filled with political and social
criticism. It is not uncommon for the “mourners” to blame the high cost of life, the lack of proper medical attention or the corruption of the politicians for Joselito’s death. This theatrical representation provides a propitious space for a spontaneous carnival expression that supports freedom of expression, role inversion, temporary disappearance of class, racial, and gender divisions, in the carnival space *par excellence*, the streets of the Barrio Abajo.

Unlike other carnival events, Joselito’s burial had not been commercialized by 1992. On the contrary, judging from the tone of an article published in El Heraldo, it was in danger of disappearing:

Do not miss, do not let it disappear, let us not miss the closing of the festivities: Joselito Carnaval. Invite your neighbors, friends, peers, and coworkers to organize the burial of Joselito Carnaval, the symbolic act with which the barranquilleros say goodbye to Colombia’s largest folkloric and popular celebration. (...) And on Tuesday, even with the hangover alive, everyone should weep at Joselito Carnaval's funeral...

“Why did you leave Jose? “...”Do not go, Jose!”

**Conclusions**

The goals established by the board of the newly formed Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. were achieved during the first edition of the festivities organized under its supervision. According to Resolution No. 2911, 1991, “the main objectives of Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. were to promote and organize carnival’s official events, to promote tourism, to protect folk traditions, and to publicize carnival at the national and international levels.”

87 “El martes, que no falte Joselito,” *El Heraldo*, sábado, febrero 29, 1992, 6C.

88 Resolución No. 2911 de 1991.
The first goal was achieved by putting together a program featuring twenty official events including, for the first time, two coordinated by independent organizations. This inclusive approach to the organization of the festivities was very successful because it provided different options for both the carnival actors and the general public through different areas of the city during the pre-carnival and the carnival seasons.

All events included in the official program benefited from the fact that Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. hired professionals to plan and execute each and every one of them, and to provide logistic and promotional support to the organizations that coordinated their own parades. The board appointed different committees led by people chosen from both the public and the private sectors. Together they took responsibility for putting the events together and were accountable for the end results. Accountability was a key word in this particular context. For the first time in the history of carnival’s organization, all the individuals involved with the events were supervised and instructed to perform in a professional and honest manner. For the most part, the board succeeded in putting together a reliable team of professionals and volunteers.

As for successes and failures, there were many. Due to the complexity of the organization of each individual event, it was difficult to please everyone. Lacking prior experience led to mistakes in many areas. The Batalla de Flores was particularly controversial. It was criticized by some and applauded by others, as an article in El Heraldo explained:

For some it was great, but for others it was not as splendid as the previous year’s. The public had mixed feelings about not featuring the danzas between the floats (as it was done in previous years). Some say it was magnificent, others that it was not good. It did not work out well for the

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89 El Heraldo, domingo, enero 19, 1992, 2B.
organizers separating the floats from the folkloric groups, because not all of them had their own music. Potholes were also notorious. The thirty-five floats were all inspired by folkloric carnival expression, and the forty folkloric groups displayed their enthusiasm and color along the Vía 40. The Batalla de Flores began on time and took place in an orderly manner, under the efficient control of law enforcement. The parade ended at 6 pm.90

The article focused on many positive aspects that characterized not only the Batalla de Flores but also most of the events organized by Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. including punctuality, organization, and security. Criticism was well received as illustrated by the fact that, in addition to implementing the program in only one and one half months, the corporation established the first carnival archives to organize all documents including reports, to be used in the future to ameliorate those areas needing improvement.91 Although not without flaws, all events fulfilled the expectations of the majority of the public, the carnival actors, and the organizers.

The second goal of the corporation was to promote carnival as a tourist destination. Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. developed a promotional campaign and increased the number of international tourists by organizing an international beauty pageant and inviting international bands to the Festival de Orquestas y Acordeones. According to an article published in El Heraldo, “During the carnival season, the city hotels were filled almost 100% by national and international tourists. The majority came from Venezuela, Panama, and Canada. (...) Hundreds of tourists from different regions of the country and foreigners mingled with the barranquilleros during the carnival

90 El Heraldo, miércoles, marzo 4, 1992, 2C.

season, sharing the popular happiness.”92 According to Enrique Berrio, tourists who could not find hotel rooms or wanted more economic lodging rented rooms in private homes, benefiting the city’s informal economy.93 Overall, the goal of promoting carnival as a tourist destination was fulfilled, benefiting the local community at the economic level.

A very important goal of Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. was to protect popular expressions that year after year had participated in carnival events. In addition to providing different venues for the participation of hundreds of groups, the organization allocated 27.22% of its income among them, organized educational workshops, and promoted the development of micro-entrepreneurs. A report issued by the corporation emphasized this particular issue:

The company highlighted the fact it donated $ 25.7 million (pesos) to folk groups, doubling the amount delivered in 1991 and making these contribution on a timely basis. In relation to folk groups, the true essence of Carnival, the corporation also highlighted the contribution of Barranquilla’s Chamber of Commerce and the Asociación de Grupos Folclóricos del Atlántico in the organization of workshops. Folk groups were also supported by the Fundación Mario Santo Domingo through a special program for micro-entrepreneurs.94

Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. and specific individuals involved with the organization, including Paul Tarud, Mariano Puche and Pablo Obregón from the Fundación Mario Santo Domingo, and Enrique Berrio from Barranquilla’s Chamber of Commerce, went above and beyond their duties to support carnival’s groups. Besides fulfilling the most traditional objectives of carnival celebrations, which according to

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García Canclini are to provide entertainment for the masses and to benefit them with the creation of jobs, the corporation acknowledged the primordial role played by the leaders and members of the groups as keepers of the cultural traditions and the importance of their cultural expressions as an intangible patrimony.

The fourth and last goal was to publicize carnival at the national and international levels. Local, national and international media covered the different events of the precarnival and carnival seasons. The local press focused not only on the Carnival Queen and information related to the elite’s interests but also provided information pertaining to the popular classes, including the election of the popular queen and the participation of folkloric groups in carnival parades. Perhaps the most successful aspect of media coverage was the transmission of the Batalla de Flores, the Gran Parada, and the Festival de Orquestas y Acordeones through Telecaribe. In addition to obtaining $9.5 million pesos for the transmission rights, carnival was seen by hundreds of thousands of viewers locally and nationally. This is particularly meaningful for several reasons. On one hand, it allowed those who could not afford the prices of the palcos or the festival tickets to enjoy the different events, and on the other, it reached the growing migrant population residing in Colombia’s main cities, allowing them to virtually reconnect with a celebration that is part of their culture and their identity.

An aspect that played a significant role in the success of Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A.’s first carnival celebration was the economic factor. Financially, the corporation was able to regain the support of a number of local and national businesses, partly due to the fact that it had more credible and trustworthy reputation than the previous government-run entities that since 1942 managed the organization of the carnival events. With many
of the sponsoring companies receiving direct benefits during the carnival season, especially those with businesses in the retail, food, and alcohol sectors, the corporation was able to gain the support of local industries and national financial institutions. It is important to mention that the corporation also received the support of businesses and individuals that above and beyond their invested interests supported the civic and popular aspects of the festivities. Many individuals who volunteered their time, donated anonymously to Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. or sponsored groups directly without profiting in any way deserve a special recognition.

Some critics rightly claimed that the financial viability of the new corporation was attained at the expense of the general public that was forced to pay to attend many events which in the past were free, or at the expense of businesses that complained of being highly taxed. As per the articles of incorporation, it was agreed that the local government would transfer all tax revenues and broadcast rights to Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. so that the corporation would have its own income and sufficient funds to finance all carnival events.\footnote{El Heraldo, domingo, enero, 19, 1992, 2B.} According to the corporation’s report, Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. had a positive balance of more than sixty million pesos in 1992. Of that amount, 14.36% of the income ($22.199 million pesos) came from taxes to public dances, casetas (temporary popular dancing halls), and pick-ups (sound systems used in public spaces). Taxes were raised, palcos and festival tickets became a source of income, transmission rights were paid, and donations were made, providing funds to cover the multimillion pesos expenses of an event of such magnitude. The Carnaval de Barranquilla had become a business, a profitable and transparent one, with financial reports being part of
the public domain, benefiting the government and the private sector but most important, benefiting the community with a celebration that was no longer in danger of disappearing.\textsuperscript{96}

Despite the fact that financially Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. was able to secure the support of the private sector, there was still a large group of potential sponsors reluctant to support the organization because legally it was a for-profit corporation.\textsuperscript{97} In order to ease that concern and to adjust to the nature of the entity, the Fundación Carnaval de Barranquilla was later incorporated as a non-for-profit organization.

In 1997, the Fundación Carnaval de Barranquilla is created because the very essence of the festivity warrants it since it allow it to receive donations, it is by nature a non-for-profit, and if there is a surplus it is reinvested in the same social purpose for which it was created, thus ensuring its operation since it significantly reduces tax payments to the national administration, achieving a real social and cultural commitment to the Carnaval de Barranquilla.\textsuperscript{98}

Since 1992, Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A., and later the Fundación Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. have been in charge of organizing and overseeing all official events of the festivities. Every year they have faced new challenges, criticisms, and complaints, but overall, they have been able to secure the continuity of the celebration under the leadership of an experienced and professional staff that is constantly evaluating its performance and auditing its finances making them available to the public, as no other organization had previously done. More important, in 1992 the Carnaval de Barranquilla consolidated itself as a cultural space for the representation of a rich tradition resulting

\textsuperscript{96} Alberto Gómez Struss, interviewed by the author, Barranquilla, November 2004.

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{98} \url{http://www.carnavaldebarranquilla.org/preguntasfrecuentes_2.html} (accessed July 24, 2012)
from a multi-ethnic history kept alive by both the elite and the popular classes with an important degree of consensus that reflects the common identity of the *barranquilleros*.
CHAPTER FIVE
THE CARNIVAL PARADE: MIRROR OF SOCIETY

Most historical carnival studies focus on the development of one or several aspects of the celebration over a specific period of time. In this chapter I suggest a different methodological approach, to analyze the carnival parade as a historical document. Parades are expressions of cultural identities and reflect the social, political and economic contexts in which they occur. Carnival parades are also spaces in which criticism is allowed and stages in which participants are able to express themselves freely despite being in a controlled environment.

For over twenty years, Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. and the Fundación Carnaval de Barranquilla have organized and/or coordinated all official events of Barranquilla’s carnival, including the three main parades of the four day-long celebration: the Batalla de Flores, the Gran Parada de Tradición, and the Gran Parada de Fantasía o de Comparsas. Besides being the most attended, they are transmitted by the regional TV channel, Telecaribe, making them the most seen not only locally but nationally.

It is important to note that other organizations coordinate parades within the metropolitan area during the pre-carnival and carnival seasons, either with the support of the Fundación Carnaval de Barranquilla or independently, and that it is common for groups and individuals to participate in two or more events.

Parades are the most photographed spectacles during carnival celebrations. Professionals and amateurs capture thousands of images of individuals in costumes and dancers as well as the general public. Beyond showing colorful attires and smiling faces, their photographs provide valuable information that documents not only the history of the
celebration, but also issues pertaining to the economic, political, social, and cultural context in which it occurs.

For example, the photograph taken during the first Batalla de Flores (1903), below, depicts a decorated carriage carrying a distinguished couple from the elite class elegantly dressed in foreign-inspired fashionable clothes (Fig. 44). The participation of a female in a public event was a rarity for the time, but understandable considering Barranquilla’s liberal attitude towards women and their involvement in the city’s cultural life. The coachman and the passerby depicted in the back of the picture illustrate the presence of Afro-Colombians in Barranquilla and their impact in the development of the city’s working class. Although the site where the photograph was taken cannot be identified, the building in the background illustrates the modern architectural development of the city, which by 1903 had already established itself as an important commercial hub.

The image provides interesting facts regarding Barranquilla’s society at the turn of the twentieth century. It shows a prosperous elite appropriating foreign fashions and new technologies in their quest for modernization. Its members are aware of the latest trends including the phonograph that in the context of carnival is somehow visionary. At the beginning of the 1940s the Carnaval de Barranquilla would become an important scenario for the music business. The image also illustrates the presence of social divisions based on economic differences, typical of developing industrial societies. The couple riding the carriage belongs to the upper class while the coachman belongs to a lower class. Note that there is a clear difference in their skin tone. The couple has lighter skin while the coachman is a descendant of enslaved Africans. The image illustrates the fact that as the city grew, the members of the working class, including domestic employees and factory workers, were for the most part of African descent.

Another photograph taken during the Batalla de Flores, in 1903, shows the transformation of Barranquilla’s main avenue, the Camellón Abello, into a European-looking boulevard, a gathering space where social life and business meetings took place at the time (Fig. 45). The majority of the people depicted in the picture are men, as women were expected to stay in the privacy of their homes. The presence of sailors, dressed in white uniforms, illustrates the function of the city as a port. The streets are relatively crowded, not only because people gathered to see the spectacle, but also because the population was increasing. By 1903, the city had approximately 15,000 inhabitants.

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1 In 1874, Barranquilla had 11,595 inhabitants, and in 1912, 19,735 inhabitants. Bushnell, 444.
Fig. 45. Photograph taken at the Camellón Abello, at four o’clock in the afternoon, on Saturday, 21 February, 1903, from the southern end of the street, Edificio del Cuartel (military quarters’ building), from where the victorias that participated in the first Batalla de Flores departed (1903). Photographer unknown. Published in Alfredo De la Espriella, Carnaval de Barranquilla. Centenario de la Batalla de Flores 1903-2003. Álbum del Recuerdo. Barranquilla: Editorial Mejoras, 2003, 17.

In this case, the image provides a visual testimony of the city’s urban development and demographic growth. Masonry buildings of several floors replaced the original one story hatched roof houses that surrounded the city’s main streets in the nineteenth century. Hundreds of individuals are shown walking or sitting on the benches installed in the pedestrian area of the boulevard. Their presence illustrates not only the growth of the population, but also how business and community building occurred in the town’s public spaces. Unfortunately, with the rapid growth of the city and the lack of appropriate urban planning throughout the twentieth century, these types of gathering
spaces disappeared and their absence is blamed, in part, for the lack of community spirit in Barranquilla’s contemporary society.²

Following these examples, I will use photographs taken over the past eight years to describe and analyze several aspects of the parades that constitute visual testimonies of the carnival and the city’s historical development from an economic, political, social and cultural perspective. The first aspect I will consider is the economic dimension. The Carnaval de Barranquilla is a capitalistic enterprise that functions as a profitable business for the different entities and individuals involved, including Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A., local businesses and persons who work in the informal sector. Photographs of carnival parades are filled with advertising signs of the companies that not only support the festivities, but also play a significant role in the local economy. Photographs also provide a visual testimony of an important aspect of the celebration that mirrors everyday life in the city: the “economía del rebusque” or informal economy.

The second aspect I analyze is the political dimension. Historically, Barranquilla’s carnival and politics have had very strong ties. In addition to being affected by politics at the organizational level, carnival has provided a propitious space for political proselytism. The Carnaval de Barranquilla has also served as scenario for traditional carnival expressions inspired by historical events. The Farotas de Talaigua, a traditional dance that recalls an indigenous tale from Conquest times, and El Descabezado, a costume inspired by the historical period known as “La Violencia” (1946-1957), are analyzed from this particular perspective. Because political violence has been such a strong component of Colombia’s history, it is also present in Carnival parades.

The third aspect I consider in my analysis is the social sphere. Carnival parades illustrate the city’s demographic growth through the increasing number of actors and spectators. In many cases it is difficult to differentiate them due to the inclusive nature of the celebration. The Carnaval de Barranquilla is a festivity that embraces diversity in terms of socio-economic status, age, gender, and ethnic background. An interesting question regarding this issue is whether there is in fact interaction and inclusion, or on the contrary, if carnival parades reinforce divisions, particularly at the socio-economic level.

The fourth and final dimension I consider is the cultural sphere. Photographs provide a valuable testimony of the city’s urban development and architectonic patrimony. By comparing early twentieth-century photographs of the Batalla de Flores to images of the Cumbiódromo in the twenty-first century, it is possible to see the transformation from small city to widespread metropolis and to analyze carnival’s use of the city’s public spaces.

Also from a cultural perspective, photographs provide a unique testimony of one of the most important aspects of this celebration: its cultural expressions. It is precisely its role as keeper of cultural traditions that makes the Carnaval de Barranquilla unique compared to other types of festivals in Colombia. Danzas, comparsas and costumes unique to Barranquilla’s carnival are important symbols of the city’s cultural patrimony. Danzas and comparsas also inspire a sentiment of pride and belonging among their members and play an important role in building identity. Portraits taken during the parades illustrate not only how participants proudly identify with their groups, but also how they express a strong regional and nationalistic sentiment through the display of flags and patriotic symbols.
Carnival from an Economic Perspective

Since its origins the Carnaval de Barranquilla has had an impact on the city’s economy. In the nineteenth century, the municipality charged ten cents for a passport that allowed individuals to walk on the streets without costumes preventing the Indios de Trenza to hold them hostage and tie them to the Vara Santa.\(^3\) By the 1940s, carnival was promoted as a tourist destination benefiting the government and the private sector, particularly businesses related to transportation, lodging, food and entertainment. As the city’s industrial development declined and the local economy decelerated in the 1950s and 1960s, carnival presented an unusual opportunity to create temporary employment and to generate significant income. During the 1970s and 1980s, corrupt individuals including politicians and government officials mismanaged and stole funds from carnival events creating a financial chaos that led to the decline of the celebration. This situation inspired a civic movement that promoted the creation of Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A., in 1991, the corporation that has managed the festivities’ official events for over twenty years.

The Carnaval de Barranquilla is a capitalistic enterprise that functions as a “for profit” business. Since its creation, Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. has developed a financial strategy to cover the costs of all official carnival events. According to the most recent report issued by the Fundación Carnaval de Barranquilla, nine billion pesos were invested in the organization of the 2012 festivities which included forty-four events attended by over 1.4 million spectators. Revenues were generated by four major sources: “gestión comercial” (advertising and sponsorships) 46%, Colombia’s Ministry of...

\(^3\) De la Espriella, 2003, 8.
Culture 4%, event ticket sales 9%, and palcos and mini-palcos (smaller bleachers at lower prices) 41%. Expenses included events’ production 69%, allocations to carnival participants 13.02%, carnival’s promotion 3.64%, administration 13.5%, and operational expenses of the new interactive showroom 0.85%. The report also indicated that the Fundación Carnaval de Barranquilla generated 8,400 jobs during the celebration of the 2012 carnival festivities.5

Yearly audited financial reports show the transparency of the corporation’s finances. It is important to note that Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. does not distribute profits among its shareholders but reinvests them in the production of the following year’s events and the distribution of allocations among the individuals and groups registered with the Fundación Carnaval de Barranquilla. In 2012, 13.02% of the budget, corresponding to $1,055,604,803 pesos, was allocated to twenty-two thousand people, including members of danzas, cumbiambas, comparsas, artisans, and artists. In addition to cash allocations, many of them received training on how to use the funds wisely, a helpful tool particularly for those who are unemployed or retired and live from carnival’s income the rest of the year.6 Overall, the 2012 carnival celebrations moved approximately forty billion pesos (approximately twenty-two million dollars) and generated twenty thousand jobs.7

4 The Sala del Carnaval Elsa Caridi, inaugurated in April, 2011, is an interactive educational space equipped with high-tech resources that functions at the Casa del Carnaval.


6 Ibid.

A detailed analysis of carnival’s economic impact and the financial aspects of the celebration from a historical perspective is a complex issue that deserves to be studied in greater detail. In this study, I will briefly analyze how photographs of the parades illustrate two aspects of carnival’s economic impact: the commercialization of carnival through advertising and the development of the city’s informal economy during carnival events.”

Advertising plays a major role in carnival’s economy. Every year companies can have their names and logos printed on floats, music trailers, palcos, mini-palcos, and “zanqueros’ (men in stilts carrying banners). Advertising can also be displayed in “publiposters” (banners hanging from light posts) and welcoming signs located in several streets around the city. The most visible banners during the Batalla de Flores and the Gran Parada de Tradición y de Comparsas parades are the ones located on the lower and upper edges of the palcos and the minipalcos, and on the street’s lampposts.

The majority of the banners that decorate the *palcos* and the *mini-palcos* of the Vía 40 advertise local supermarkets chains, department stores, liquor distillers and distributors, an indication that retail businesses benefit the most during carnival times. This is not surprising as food and liquor consumption is one of the universal characteristics of carnival worldwide, as people are supposed to indulge prior to the beginning of Lent. In the past couple of years, mobile phone companies have also expended large sums of money in advertisement indicating the role of telecommunications in today’s society.

By comparing photographs from previous years to more recent ones it is possible to identify not only the names of the companies that have supported the events over a period of time but also changes in the local economy. For example, in the 1990s it was...
common to see banners from two Barranquilla based supermarkets, Almacenes Vivero and Supermercados Olímpica. In 2000, Vivero merged with Carulla and formed Carulla Vivero S.A. becoming the second largest retail chain in Colombia. In 2006, Carulla Vivero was acquired by Almacenes Éxito the largest supermarket company in the country and the third largest business in Colombia. The history of the mergers and acquisitions of these particular companies is illustrated by the changes of advertising banners during carnival celebrations over several years.


Since 2006, several kilometers of mini-palcos have been decorated with Éxito’s yellow banners on a yearly basis. In addition to advertising the largest national supermarket chain, the signs appear in the background of most photographs and live TV transmissions, bombarding the public with Éxito’s repetitive images.
Fig. 48. Cumbiamba La Pollera Colorá, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2010. Photo by Francine Birbragher.

Perhaps more important than reaching potential buyers, Éxito’s advertising campaign portrays the company as a community supporter. The banners display Éxito’s logo (the name of the store means “success”) with carnival symbols including Congos, Toritos, Marimondas, Monocucos, and Negritas Puloy. By adding these symbols to the banners the company conveys the idea that Éxito supports the celebration and the popular classes’ expressions.
Fig. 49. Éxito’s advertising banners on *mini-palcos*, Cumbiódromo, 2008. Photo by Francine Birbragher.

Éxito’s support of the festivities is expected to have a positive impact not only among its potential customers, but also among its employees. Éxito is the largest single employer in Colombia and a major job provider in Colombia’s Caribbean coast. By supporting an event that is dear to its employees, the company connects with them and establishes a common ground that may facilitate the relations between the management and the employees.

Another major carnival sponsor is Cerveza Águila, the most popular beer brand produced by Bavaria, the tenth largest Colombian company. Beer is the country’s most widely consumed alcoholic beverage and is highly consumed during carnival times. Beer forms part of Colombia’s culture and has been associated with Barranquilla’s carnival.

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celebrations since 1905 when barranquilleros tasted beer produced locally from the very first time.

Fig. 50. Photographers Raquel Caridi and Vivian Saad, Cumbiódromo, 2005. Photo by Francine Birbragher.

Cerveza Águila’s advertising campaign during carnival events includes not only banners displayed on palcos and publiposters but also canopies, giveaways and large advertising boards featuring young attractive women in bikini known as “Chicas Cerveza Águila.” These girls, who ride on Cerveza Águila’s trailer during the Batalla de Flores parade, are one of the few examples of semi-naked sex symbols in the context of the Carnaval de Barranquilla. There are two main reasons for this. On one hand, carnival evolved as a cultural space for the orderly display of traditional expressions, and on the other, Barranquilla’s society is dominated by monotheistic religious values that impose
certain levels of modesty and discourage nakedness and lack of decorum in public spectacles.

Fig. 51. Advertising banners Chicas Águila, Vía 40, 2007. Photo by Francine Birbragher.

Cerveza Águila’s 2012 advertising campaign was designed as homage to one of the most popular Colombian singers and composers, Joe Arroyo, who passed away at the age of 55 on July 26, 2011. The tricolor banners, bearing Colombia’s flag yellow, blue, and red, were decorated with his portrait and the words “Aquí el Joe vivirá por siempre. Gracias Joe.” The Vía 40 and major streets were filled with ads honoring a popular figure dear to all social classes who had strong ties with carnival and Colombia’s musical tradition. From a marketing perspective, the company was able to connect to the public and entice it to purchase the product in memory of an unforgettable carnavalero.
Regarding advertising during carnival parades, it is important to mention that since the Fundación Carnaval S.A. was under the direction of María Cecilia Donado (2005) there has been a clear effort to control and/or minimize the way advertising is displayed during the parades on flags, floats, and music trailers. Special emphasis has been made in prohibiting commercial advertising on dancers’ outfits and costumes, except for those who are wearing costumes made out of recyclable materials or inspired by the products they represent.
As previously stated, carnival has a significant impact on the local economy. According to the Fundación para el Desarrollo del Caribe (Fundesarrollo), major carnival events generated estimated sales of 22.3 billion pesos in 2007, of which 14,830 billion came from the formal sector and 7.5 billion from the informal sector.\textsuperscript{10} That means that approximately one third of the sales benefited individuals who were not formally employed or who looked for additional income during carnival times. It is customary to take advantage of the festivities to make money with what is commonly known as “el rebusque,” by selling food, alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, crafts, entertainment

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
services, and other creative enterprises such as charging for using a home’s bathroom or making calls from cellular phones.

Fig. 54. Informal economy: restroom rental and home-made food sale, Barranquilla, 2008. Photo by Francine Birbragher.

I would put the photo right after (Fig. 55). Otherwise it is difficult for the reader to get the point of your analysis. Most individuals who benefit from the informal economy during carnival times are people from the lower classes who are generally unemployed or self-employed. Sales during carnival times represent a significant source
of income for men, women, and children, real people portrayed in photographs taken during carnival parades such as the one included below (Fig. 55). Street-vendors like the two depicted in the picture work very hard, carrying heavy wooden trays filled with snacks in excruciating heat, so they deserve the break they take seated on the street. The woman looks tired but smiles at the camera as she smokes a cigarette and takes her sandals off to rest. The man wears a jersey from the local soccer team, the Junior de Barranquilla, to show his support and fan pride. The woman seems to be enjoying the opportunity to take a break. Both individuals, like the majority of the people who work as street vendors in Barranquilla, are of African descent. The majority of the city’s population, particularly those who are unemployed, self-employed or also occupy the lower level of the work force, are Afro-Colombian reflecting the historical background of the city’s demographics.

Another detail that caught my eye was the fact they were sitting on the pavement. Because the Vía 40 is not intended for pedestrians on a regular basis, there are no public benches for taking a short break. Even when the avenue is transformed to stage the parades, the only areas where people can sit are the palcos, the mini-palcos or the areas filled with rental chairs, where street vendors have no access. Like many areas in Barranquilla, the Vía 40 is not endowed with appropriate resting areas for pedestrians. It lacks appropriate seating and shaded spaces not only for peddlers but also for employees who on a regular basis walk through its sidewalks on their way to or from work. It is perhaps a reflection of the capitalistic aspect of the city’s industrialization. No time to rest, always on the go…
Finally, a quick look at the products they offer shows they are selling nationally produced candy, snacks and cigarettes. In the 1980s, they would have probably displayed smuggled goods including U.S. made candy and brand cigarettes. Foreign products were appealing and difficult to find in local stores. With the mergers and acquisitions of local industries by/with international conglomerates, including the purchase of Coltabaco by Phillip Morris, in 2005, and the recent merger of Cadbury Adams with Kraft Foods (2012), popular products like Malboro or Trident gum do not need to be imported as they are now produced in Colombia. By selling locally produced goods, these “informal” sellers are supporting the national economy, creating a sort of interdependence between the formal and the informal sectors. Furthermore, these products illustrate how Colombia’s industry has become an active player in the process of globalization that characterizes today’s economy.

Fig. 55. Street vendors, Vía 40, 2007. Photo by Francine Birbragher.
Barranquilleros can be very creative when it comes to generating income during carnival times. They offer bike rides, they charge fees for using restrooms and making calls from cellular phones, they sell home-made traditional dishes in front of their houses, and they rent chairs along the sidewalks where parades take place. The lease of chairs became such a productive business that the local government decided to regulate it. From 2001 to 2003, the Fundación Carnaval de Barranquilla was in charge of assigning permits, but after much controversy the government took over in 2004. The “silleros” (people who rent chairs) have to get the permits from the Alcaldía Distrital and pay taxes according to the number of chairs they rent in different events. The number of permits is limited for each event as well as the price they are allowed to charge for the service, which averages $10,000 pesos per chair. What was once a form of informal economy has become a formal one, as it is now regulated and taxed by the government.

Street vendors sell all kinds of merchandise such as sunglasses, hats, and crafts during the carnival season (Fig. 56). Colombia’s Caribbean coast is known for its artesanías, including the traditional sombreros vueltiao, wooden masks, ceramics, and mochilas. Carnival offers great opportunities for artisans to sell and promote their products. Many of them run small or home-based businesses that produce costumes, t-shirts, masks, and accessories that are sold not only during carnival events but throughout the year as souvenirs. In some cases, what began as a temporary source of income considered part of carnival’s informal economy has been transformed into a formal business, creating not only steady incomes but also permanent sources of jobs.

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11 Information provided by Miguel Salas, September 25, 2012.
The photograph above is a perfect example of the interdependencies between the informal and the formal economies and integration of the informal economy into the formal economy through training, technical assistance, and credit strategies including micro-financing. A marginal and peripheral economic form is incorporated into the
modern capitalist system, the same way a spontaneous form of transgression such as carnival has been transformed into a controlled and organized spectacle. From this perspective, carnival and society mirror each other.

Street vendors are an integral part of Colombian Caribbean culture and as symbols of everyday life they have inspired some of the costumes used during carnival parades, including the one used by a girl dressed as a “vendedoras de alegrías” depicted in the photograph included below (Fig. 57). Images of palenqueras, Afro-Colombian women originally from the maroon community of San Basilio de Palenque known for carrying metal containers filled with colorful fruits are part of the coastal cities’ urban scenery. In some cases, women carry other types of typical foods such as bollos (a sort of tamale made out of corn or yucca) or alegrías (popcorn balls flavored with coconut or anis). These iconic street vendors inspired the costume worn by the girl depicted in the photograph who not only presents a colorful and original outfit but also honors the women who every day roam the streets of the Caribbean cities selling the local delights. The picture depicts a beautiful child wearing a colorful dress carrying “alegrías” on her head. Only a photograph can convey the joyful spirit of this young girl who symbolically sells a traditional treat called “happiness,” a contagious feeling very much in tune with the spirit of the celebration.
Fig. 57. Girl dressed as a “vendedora de alegrías,” Gran Parada de Tradición, 2009. Photo by Francine Birbragher.

Carnival plays a significant role in the local economy. The entity that controls carnival’s official events also controls a considerable amount of funds that help finance the different activities that take place during the celebration. Under Carnaval de
Barranquilla S.A. and the Fundación Carnaval de Barranquilla’s management, these funds have also benefited the “hacedores del carnaval,” individuals belonging from the most part to the popular classes and who from generation to generation have kept alive the region’s cultural traditions. Private financial support has transformed parades into sales showcases for local and national companies who display advertising banners hoping to reach millions of people participating in carnival parades. Those involved in informal economic activities also take advantage of carnival to sell food, beverages, crafts, services and specific carnival items such as foam cans. In some cases the limits between the formal and the informal aspects of their activities are blurred and the system achieves the integration of the informal economy into the formal economy. But there are still many informal ways through which the unemployed and the self-employed benefit from carnival’s bonanza, challenging the system the same way carnavales manage to transgress the order established by the organizers despite the government’s regulations.

Carnival and Politics

Chapters two, three and four covered the way the government has been involved with carnival since 1903 and how politics have played a significant role in the organization of the festivities. We may recall that in 1903, for example, the Conservadores won the Guerra de los 1000 Días, and General Vengoechea excluded the Liberales from carnival’s official events on that particular year. Beginning in the 1940s, the government’s involvement was more direct as it took over the organization of the festivities, a trend that continued until the 1980s when the “ politicization” of the celebration led to a serious crisis. With the creation of Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A., major changes were implemented regarding not only the economic aspect of the events’
organization, but also the negative influence local politics had in their implementation. Led by an independent executive board, the corporation was able to avoid for the most part the political manipulation of many aspects of the celebration including the election of popular queens, favoritism in the allocation of contracts, and the purchase of votes in exchange for favors. Despite these important changes, carnival continues to provide an excellent arena for local politics.

The Carnaval de Barranquilla has had a close relation with political campaigns throughout the twentieth century not only because for a long time they were intertwined, but also because political campaigns in Colombia have a festive character that mirrors carnival celebrations. Although the creation of Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. and the Fundación Carnaval de Barranquilla has depoliticized the organization of carnival events, it is not uncommon for politicians to do proselytism during the celebrations and for barranquilleros to take advantage of carnival events to support their political candidates on elections years.

In 2006, for example, Armando Alberto Benedetti Villaneda campaigned for his reelection to the Senate with the support of Monocucos and Marimondas (Fig. 58). Interestingly, his followers chose the two traditional costumes that hide the identity of the individuals wearing them. The Monocucos or “capuchones,” inspired by the Venetian Harlequin, cover their bodies with colorful long robes, their heads with short hoods, and their faces with masks. The Marimonda, an original creation by a barranquillero, uses old clothes and gloves to cover the body, a long tie, and a pillow case, adorned with two large ears and a long nose, to cover his head. The first costume was used in the old days to hide the identity of individuals who attended popular dances. In many cases, they
belonged to the elite and used the costume to mingle and have fun with members of the
popular classes blurring socio-economic and spatial boundaries. The second costume was
originally used by an individual belonging to the lower classes, a “resentido,” who
criticized society and particularly corrupt politicians, as symbolized by the big tie.
Interestingly, those costumes are used today by members of the upper classes who
participate in carnival parades as members of the Monocucos de las Nieves y
Marimondas de Barrio Abajo, two of the comparsas that include participants of all socio-
economic levels. By wearing these specific costumes, Benedetti’s supporters tried to win
the votes of all potential followers, particularly those who reside in the Barrio El Prado,
one of Barranquilla’s upscale neighborhoods where the photograph was taken.
In 2010, Alvaro Antonio Ashton Giraldo used an innovative form of campaigning. He hired a motorized parachute printed with his name and instructions on how to vote for him and had it fly over the Vía 40 during the Batalla de Flores (Fig. 59). Both candidates Benedetti and Ashton were elected and served on the Colombian Senate.
Also in 2010, thousands of flyers and stickers promoting the autonomy of the Caribbean region were distributed during carnival events. Led by the governor of the Departamento del Atlántico, Eduardo Verano, the campaign sought to educate the public about the need to support a referendum that advocated more independence from the centralized government. The ballot, which was included in the March 2010 elections, read as follows: “I am voting for the constitution of the Caribbean region as a territorial entity of public law, with autonomy to manage its interests, to promote economic and social development of our country within the State and the Colombian Constitution.”

The campaign was publicized all over the city prior to the elections, particularly during carnival events.
A photograph of two Marimondas shows one of these stickers displayed on one of the mask’s ears (Fig. 60). The sticker reads: “Yes Caribbean Region. Vote yes.” Interestingly, the individual who first invented the Marimonda costume used the mask’s ears to criticize the government’s bureaucracy and political corruption. Several decades later, the same costume was being used by an individual to promote an official political campaign. The costume had not only been embellished over the years, it had been transformed into a vehicle for political proselytism.

An interesting detail is the fact that the individual displaying the sticker belongs to the middle or the lower class. Although there are over six hundred Marimondas, it is possible to distinguish the “real ones,” those who reside in the Barrio Abajo or belong to the working class, and the “guests,” including businessmen, politicians, and diplomats. The former wear the same fabric shoes and the latter use all kinds of tennis shoes. It is not possible to distinguish the footwear in this particular picture, but there is another detail that allows us to identify the individual as an “authentic Marimonda.” In 2010, some of the “real ones” used small umbrellas as part of their costumes to perform a specific choreography during the parades. The Marimonda depicted on the right of the photograph carries one of those umbrellas on her waist. The detail is important as it identifies the individual supporting the campaign as a member of the popular classes. The governor’s proposal had, based on this particular detail, attracted popular support.
It is interesting how carnival costumes can provide historical information, such as the proposed “Si Región Caribe” referendum illustrated in the previous photograph. The truth is that all the Carnaval de Barranquilla’s cultural expressions have their own histories, but some of them are particularly valuable from a historical perspective. A few dances and costumes are in fact historical documents, as they are inspired by specific historical traditions. Since Colombia has experienced violence since the arrival of the conquistadors in the fifteenth century, it is not surprising that violence is present in many carnival expressions inspired by historical traditions, such as the Farotas de Talaigua dance and the individual costume El Descabezado.
The members of the group Farotas de Talaigua have traveled from the town of Talaigua, located in the Departamento de Bolívar, to participate in Barranquilla’s carnival events on a yearly basis since its creation in 1985. Directed for over twenty-five years by Etelvina Dávila, the dance recreates one of the oldest popular expressions of the Caribbean coast dating from the beginning of the seventeenth century. The dance recalls the story of the ancient indigenous people from Talaigua who dressed as women to ambush the Spaniards who came to the town to kidnap their wives and daughters during the Conquest period.

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13 For many years, the director of the dance, Etelvina Dávila accompanied the group during the parades. Upon her passing, her daughter Mónica Ospino Dávila became the director of the group in 2012.

14 Etelvina Dávila, interviewed by the author, February 2011
As illustrated in the photograph included above, the Farotas de Talaigua dance features adult men and one child who dress as women and perform a warrior dance to a specific rhythm (Fig. 61). They wear hats decorated with colorful artificial flowers, long-sleeved blouses covered with sequined bibs, and long colorful skirts, earrings, lipstick, and red marks in their cheeks to emphasize their feminine character. They also carry bright colored umbrellas as part of their costumes.

The immediate comparison that comes to mind from carnival scholarship is the trans-gender expressions common in European and Caribbean carnivals. In this case, it is important to understand that the Farotas are not making a statement about gender but rather telling the story of their ancestors, the Faroto Indians, who defended their women from Spanish conquistadors by organizing ambushes dressed as Spanish women. Their costumes are a testimony of their ancestors’ courage and inventiveness.

If their attire shows a feminine trait, their dance is performed in a very masculine way. They tap their feet against the floor in a strong and war-like manner. The umbrella, a symbol of femininity becomes a warrior’s shield. Since it is a warrior dance and depicts a specific story involving men, only men participate in the dance (Fig. 62).
This cultural expression lives on as a testimony of the way indigenous people fought for their rights and their pride against the Spanish Conquistadors. It proves that they were not easy to defeat as some narratives make believe, and that they were very creative with their defense strategies. The dance also addresses the fact that since very few Spanish women arrived to the new world during Conquest times, Spanish Conquistadors kidnapped and abused indigenous women.
El Descabezado, a traditional costume that has been worn at the Carnaval de Barranquilla since 1954, was also inspired by a historical period characterized by violence (Fig. 63). Its creator, Ismael Guillermo Escorcia Medina, arrived in Barranquilla from Calamar, Departamento de Bolívar, in the 1930s, when he was about seven years old. His family moved to the city looking for better opportunities and fleeing the political violence that affected Colombia’s Caribbean region. As he recalls, “at that time people
were already displaced by violence (...) resulting from political confrontations between political groups.”

As a child Escorcia Medina enjoyed dressing up during carnival. When he turned twenty-four, he decided to create a costume inspired by his childhood memories. Adults had customarily frightened him by telling him as a boy that “the headless horse, the crazy crying lady, the headless donkey will catch you if you do not go to school or eat your breakfast!” The image of the headless animal remained in his mind but what had a more immediate impact on him was Liberal politician Jorge Eliecer Gaitán’s assassination on 9 April, 1947. Medina recalls that he was eighteen years old at the time and that it affected him tremendously because he came from a Liberal family. This historical event marked the beginning of the period known as La Violencia that ran from 1946 to 1957. During those years, corpses frequently came floating down the Magdalena River, some headless, others dismembered. Escorcia Medina decided to create something that could be a continual testimony of that time, and he came up with the idea of creating a costume featuring a headless man he called El Descabezado.

Since it first appeared in 1954, the costume has retained the same form, varying only with regard to the materials used for its construction. It consists of a large-sized body, fully dressed, with a bleeding neck, carrying its head in one hand and a machete in the other. Escorcia Medina remembers the fact that crimes were committed with machetes and not with firearms as in the present due in part to the fact that the civil war

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16 Ibid.
was fought mainly in the rural areas where campesinos used machetes for their daily activities.\footnote{Ibid.}

He also recalls many anecdotes regarding the costume including the fact that on one occasion a man named José Lopeira saw the costume and borrowed it to wear at the Country Club’s Carnival party. The costume won the prize at the event, which consisted of getting free liquor for the duration of the party, but ironically its creator was not there to enjoy his triumph because the party was for members only.\footnote{Ibid.} This particular story confirms the fact that carnival celebrations at the elite level were not inclusive but rather exclusive, unlike the popular bailes where people of the upper classes were welcomed.

In recent years, Escorcia Medina has developed new characters inspired by political figures and popular culture including Edgar Rentería, the Colombian shortstop who played in the United States’ Major League Baseball from 1996 to 2011, Pedro el Escamoso, a popular Colombian soap opera character, and Joe Arroyo, a popular musician who passed away in 2011 (Fig. 64). Each character constitutes a symbol of Barranquilla’s popular culture. Rentería fulfilled the dream of many young baseball players to compete in Major League Baseball in the United States. Pedro el Escamoso was a character in a popular soap opera, and who moved from a small town to the capital where he became a driver and fell in love with his boss. Like millions of Colombians, he migrated in search for a better future, faced class discrimination and triumphed in the end. Álvaro José Arroyo González, “Joe Arroyo,” was a real successful story. He went from singing at the age of eight years old in brothels in Cartagena to being one of Colombia’s greatest performers of tropical music.
Fig. 64. Edgar Rentería, Pedro El Escamoso, and Joe Arroyo (El Descabezado costumes), Gran Parada de Tradición, 2012. Photo by Sharon Rozencaig.

Escorcia Medina’s new versions of the Descabezados have been inspired by these and other real and fictitious individuals including Fidel Castro and Colombian soccer player Carlos “El Pibe” Valderrama. Despite their distinguishable features and the humorous nature of the selections, the characters continue to be represented as beheaded individuals whose bleeding necks and hanging heads remind the public of the violent times the country continues to experience. Although it is true that the new versions seem to have largely lost the original political content, their crude and bloody presentation is in tune with the country’s continuing level of social and political violence.19

The high level of social and political violence experienced in the country has inspired different kinds of manifestations during carnival events in recent years. Every

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19 Escorcia Medina’s son Wilfrido and his grandson Wilfridito Escorcia Camargo have joined the original creator in his endeavor and have committed to continue showing the Descabezados at the Carnaval de Barranquilla. Fabio Ortiz Ribón. El Descabezado en el Carnaval de Barranquilla (Barranquilla: Fondo Mixto de Protección y Apoyo al Carnaval de Barranquilla, 2005), 32.
Colombian citizen has experienced, in one way or another, the consequences of living in a continuous civil war that has ebbed and flowed for more than a century. Therefore it is not surprising *carnavaleros* have used parades to express their feelings of discontent and to transmit their wishes for peace and the end of violence.

![Fig. 65. Garabato, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2008. Photo by Francine Birbragher.](image-url)
The bib of the *Garabato* portrayed in the photograph included above is embroidered with the words “freedom and peace,” a simple message, but a goal difficult to attain in the country’s current political situation (Fig. 65). Political violence affects every single Colombian citizen in one way or another. It is a complex situation that has led to people living in fear and insecurity for over a century.

One of the most recent scandals regarding political violence in Colombia is the one called the “*falsos positivos.*” Since 2008, thousands of civilians, falsely identified as members of the guerillas, have died at the hands of the Armed Forces. By November 2011, Colombia’s Attorney General was investigating 1,549 cases with 2,799 victims, involving 3,963 members of the military.\(^{20}\) The turban of a *Congo* who participated in the Gran Parada de Tradición, in 2011, represents Barranquilla’s coat of arms which includes an image of the Magdalena River with two vessels, the city’s flag, two canons and the words “prize for patriotism.” The coat of arms also includes a small figure that recalls the symbol used to denote the “*falso positivos*” (Fig. 66). It is a subtle subtext. Considering that the headpiece of another *Congo* from the same group featured a Chilean flag and a figure symbolizing the people who disappeared during Augusto Pinochet’s dictatorship (1973-1990) (Fig. 67), it is possible to conclude that the blue man with the red cross featured on the first turban (Fig. 66) represents not the soldier of the original coat of arms but a “*falso positivo.*”

Fig. 66. Congo Parrandero, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2011. Photo by Francine Birbragher.
It is interesting to note that both Congos (Figs. 66 and 67) have their faces painted in white, with red cheeks. According to Alfonso Fontalvo, director of the Danza El Torito, and Humberto Pernett, caporal from the Danza Cipote Garabato, the origins of this kind of face painting can be traced to Africa and has a religious meaning: It is used to
protect the individual from harm. This popular tradition reveals a concern for and a continuation of religious traditions. Initially Congos and Garabatos painted their whole faces but today many of them only paint half of their faces, a practice that is not approved by the older members of both groups. Both Fontalvo and Pernett emphasized that they do not use make-up but real paint following the original African tradition.21

Other carnival participants have shared more direct, stronger and very poignant messages like the young man featured in the following photograph holding two banners showing the portraits of policemen kidnapped and held hostage by the Colombian guerrillas at the time of the parade (Fig. 68). The individuals are identified by their ranks and names, sargento segundo José Libardo Forero Carrero; and sargento viceprimero Luis Alberto Erazo Mayaput.22

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21 Alfonso Fontalvo and Humberto Pernett, interviewed by Miguel Salas, November, 2012.

Fig. 68. Young man carrying banners with photographs of policemen kidnapped by the FARC, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2009. Photo by Francine Birbragher.

The presence of this young man displaying the photographs of two kidnapped victims and the feelings he inspired among carnival participants did not at first seem to fit within the festive character of the celebration, yet his message addressed such a poignant reality that people related to his request for the freedom of the victims with hope and respect.

This kind of expression shows that carnival is not only a time of unbounded play but also a time to think about those who are suffering due to the violence that affects the country and includes a call to unite against such violence. This spirit of unity and solidarity led to a unique demonstration against the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) on carnival Monday, 4 February, 2008, as part of a worldwide movement promoted through Facebook. Although the “Marcha por la Paz,” as the event was called, was not planned as a carnival activity, it was scheduled at the time carnival
was taking place in Barranquilla to make a clear statement: even during the celebration of the festivities people remembered those held captive by the guerrillas and demanded their release. According to the social group “Colombia soy yo” more than thirteen million people in 183 cities in Colombia and other countries walked to express their dislike for the FARC and its terrorist actions.23 In Barranquilla, the march attracted locals and tourists alike, people from all socio-economic classes, religions, and ethnic backgrounds, who united to denounce the crimes committed by the FARC.

The “Marcha por la Paz” took place in the morning, prior to the Gran Parada de Tradición. Thousands of participants marched from the Teatro Amira de la Rosa to the Plaza de la Paz located in front of the Metropolitan Cathedral, wearing white, the color of peace, and t-shirts printed with Colombian flags and the inscription “No more kidnappings, no more lies, no more deaths, no more FARC.” Some paraded in costume (Fig. 69), others carried banners (Fig. 70), and a few staged spontaneous performances in the spirit of carnival. One man, for example, painted his face with a white dove and carried heavy chains, a symbol that can be interpreted as a reference to Colombia’s violent past and as a reminder of the time of slavery during the colonial period (Fig. 69).

The massive gathering that took place at the Plaza de la Paz was an emotional experience. In the middle of carnival celebrations, people came together at the Plaza de la Paz to remember the sad reality of so many victims of violence and particularly those kidnapped by the FARC, many of whom had been deprived of their freedom for several years (Fig. 71).

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23 http://www.colombiasoyyo.org/el4f (accessed October 12, 2012)
Fig. 69. Participant at the “Marcha por la Paz en Colombia,” Barranquilla, February 2008. Photo by Francine Birbragher.
Fig. 70. Participant at the “Marcha por la Paz en Colombia,” Barranquilla, February, 2008. Photo by Francine Birbragher.
Fig. 71. “Marcha por la Paz en Colombia,” Plaza de la Paz, Barranquilla, February, 2008. Photo by Francine Birbragher.

The march was a unique historical event that occurred during the carnival season in 2008 which allowed thousands of people to say “enough!” to the FARC’s violent actions against Colombia’s population. It was not planned as a carnival event, but by being organized during the carnival celebration it benefited from the spirit of community, inclusiveness and freedom of expression that characterizes the festivities.

There is a traditional carnival expression that also says “enough” and criticizes not only political violence, but also takes a critical look at political, social, economic, and cultural realities of the local, national, and international contexts: the letanías. Written by individuals and recited by groups who roam the streets of Barranquilla during carnival times, these verses are integral parts of the celebration. Their authors take advantage of
the fact that during carnival everything is “allowed” to comment and criticize individuals and current events.

The *letanías*, original satirical verses with political or sexual references read by “*letaneros*,” constitute a rich source of oral history that is rarely documented or printed. Photographs of the groups who recite them illustrate their interaction with the public during the parades, while the actual texts corroborate their value as historical documents. *Letanías* have religious roots and follow a supplicatory rhythm which, in most cases, ends with the word “Amen.” They express grievances focusing on specific themes written with humor and in many cases with foul-mouthed language. The *letaneros* connect with the public in a special way as they share anecdotes and stories all can relate to. Their humor is contagious and their messages full of anecdotes, but most important from a historical perspective, they constitute important historical oral testimonies. The photograph included below shows the members of the *letanías* Gavi y sus Rezanderos reciting verses to people watching the parade from a *palco* during the Gran Parada de Tradición, in 2006. Although it is not possible to know what they are telling people, it is obvious that their verses are entertaining and extremely funny. Those listening are not just smiling; they seem to be shrieking with laughter (Fig. 72).
Fig. 72. Gavi y sus Rezanderos, *letanías*, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2006. Photo by Francine Birbragher.

Fig. 73. *Letanías* Ánimas Rojas de Rebolo, Barrio Abajo, Carnival Tuesday, 2007. Photo by Francine Birbragher.
Two original *letanías* provided by Orlando Barrios Mendoza, director of the Ánimas Rojas de Rebolo included below illustrate the nature of these verses. The group, founded in 1930, was named “*líder de la tradición*” on January 2008 for its continuous participation in the Carnaval de Barranquilla and was awarded the Congo de Oro in 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012 (Fig. 73).²⁴

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²⁴ Information provided by Miguel Salas, August, 2012.
Hablemos de nuestro país
que está perdiendo escalafón
el se desgana como el maíz
por la maldita corrupción

Coro

Esta mareado con santos
por que desape, en ella pedía
se las tiró de mamásanta
y por debajo también comía

Coro

Pastel de arde puro
con los ingresos seguros

Coro

Santo siguió investigando
de una forma profesional
consiguió que estaban robando
los miles de millones en la plan

Coro

Presas están cumpliendo condena
la condena que le da la sociedad
as se avergüenzan ni les da pena
pues tienen que cumplir la insoledad

Coro

Otra millonada se perdió
y se la llevaron en baules
el que no como se robó
nombrando a los primos nailes

Coro

El alcalde también cayó
por los contratos que firmó

Coro

El presidente venezolano
que a todo el mundo trata feo
le salió un cáncer en el ano
y se lo estraparon con el deo

Coro

El cubano que lo operó
enseguida lo desconectó

Coro

Ya no hay mujeres boba
porque les dieron sus derecho
al marido levantan a escoba
y le revientan el pecho

Coro

Eso son los chirretes
y que le saquen los dientes

Autor: Orlando Barrios
Carnaval 2018
Hoy estamos protestando de una manera sencilla y a la vez apoyando a la fundación carnaval de B/Quilla
una protesta callejera con gente carnavalera

los actores del carnaval a la ciudad se tomaron defendiendo lo cultural que una vez ellos soñaron
una fiesta muy famosa carnaval de la arenosa
monococos y toritos marimonas y letanías hoy le dicen al distrito no acaben con nuestra alegria
esta gente envidiosa el carnaval no lo goza
ahora nos quieren joder como a la pobre cenicienta y no queremos volver como a los años setenta
todo era un desasere para el pobre carnavalero
hay mucha gente cretina se lo digo con decoro están paloteando a la gallina de los huevos de oro
todo lo vuelven un relajo no hacen un carajo
somos 600 directores apoyando a la fundación y hay mucha gente con dolores detrás con mala intención
son directores conocidos y en la fundación están metidos
el pueblo tubo que revalarse a favor de su carnaval porque ahora quieren robarse nuestra expresión cultural
lo digo y no lo creo ellos se roban hasta un peo
si algún día desaparece
te la famosa fundación
el pueblo algo se merece
que no sea de corrupción
× que las candidatas sean bienvenidas
× y en amantes no sean convertidas
× marro abajo está descontento
× no está desagradable información
× que vive en estos momentos
× con la famosa fundación
× la fundación está investigada
× porque siempre anda disfrazada
× si volvemos a los 70
× la nostalgia ahora nos mata
× porque veremos en la vía 40
× la comparsa de las ratas
× las marimondas no se verán
× porque las ratas se las comerán
× los actores de manera exigida
× un congo decoro se merece
× a doña carla que sea relejada
× en el carnaval 2013
× pa que siga con la cultura
× y no entre la sinvergüenzura
× son tantos los sacrificios
× y en el carnaval hemos mantenido
× muchos son los beneficios
× que de la fundación hemos recibidos
× si le coge el distrito
× no recibiremos ni un pito
× le aparecieron dos duendes
× al carnaval de barranquilla
× edgar blanco y carmen melendez
× que tronco de peñadilla
× están buscando un prosecho
× y no tienen ningún derecho
× ya por hoy terminamos
× esta protesta callejera
× y a ‘/quina le informamos
× desde hoy comienza la pelotera
× con el carnaval de ‘/quina
× y políticos de pacúilla

Autor: Selección de Letanías
These original *letanías* written by Orlando Barrios are typed with an old typewriter and have notes written in pencil indicating when to say the verses in prayer mode and when as a responsive choir. The notes are an indication that these verses are not only recited, but performed following a liturgical mode.

The first *letania* criticizes former President Álvaro Uribe, current President Juan Manuel Santos, and Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez. The second was written in support of the Fundación Carnaval de Barranquilla which has been legally challenged by the local government that is trying to regain control of carnival’s organization.

The following excerpt refers to the situation that is currently taking place between the government and the Fundación Carnaval de Barranquilla. Barrios does not approve the government’s desire to take control of the carnival’s organization due to the fact that in the past it failed to run it in an efficient way and transparent way.

Now they want to screw us
like they screw poor Cinderella
but we do not want to go back
to the way it was in the 70s

Everything was despair
for the poor *carnavalero*

There are too many cretin people
I tell you with decorum
they are fighting for the hen
of the golden eggs

They make everything a mess
And they do not do shit.

In August 2012, a judgment was issued against the Fundación Carnaval de Barranquilla which will no longer be in charge, but Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. was
able to retain control, so for now it will continue to manage the festivities.\footnote{\textit{Carnaval S.A. va al frente de la fiesta,} \textit{El Tiempo}, Viernes 29 de junio, 2012.} This situation has legal and financial consequences for Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A.. As it was previously indicated, the mixed economy corporation is a profitable business and cannot issue tax exempt certificates even though the funds donated for the organization of the festivities are going to be used to benefit the community. Perhaps the most important consequence is the fact that carnival is no longer managed by a non-for profit organization and cannot, therefore, receive financial allocations from the Ministry of Culture. Attorneys are currently working on the legalities of this impasse created by individuals who have personal vendettas against a few members of the board and by politicians who are looking forward to gaining back control of the “hen of the golden eggs” to make personal gain.

Other forms of theatrical representations take advantage of the carnival parade as a space for criticism and freedom of expression. In 2011, Atala Ochoa presented a theatrical sketch inspired by the dramatic situation experienced by the victims of the heavy rains that caused serious floods in the Caribbean region in 2010 (Fig. 74). The natural disaster, caused by the phenomenon known as La Niñ\¡a, left over 120 deaths, more than 200 injured, and almost two million victims, most of them displaced due to the floods.\footnote{\textit{La Niñ\¡a intensificará las lluvias en Colombia,} eluniverso.com, Martes 16 de noviembre 2010 (accessed August 25, 2012).}

Several months after the rains stopped, the victims were still waiting for help, as illustrated by Atala Ochoa’s presentation which featured a man on a boat (on wheels) carrying his belongings (a refrigerator, a chicken on a cage, furniture, and his dog),
escorted by men and women carrying signs that declared that not all victims were accounted for and that people needed comprehensive solutions, not charity. One of the banners played on carnival’s slogan “Carnaval de Barranquilla, quien lo vive es quien lo goza” (Carnival, those who experience it, enjoy it), conveying instead “Inundación, quien la vive es quien la sufre, S.O.S.” (Flood, those who experience it suffer from it, S.O.S.)

Fig. 74. Disfraces de Atala Ochoa, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2011. Photo by Francine Birbragher.

Carnival parades have also served the government as scenario to promote campaigns with social goals, showing commitment to social improvement. Campaigns led by the Alcaldía Distrital de Barranquilla have included topics such as child abuse awareness, illegal liquor consumption, and driving under the influence of alcohol. These issues are appropriate in the context of carnival’s celebration as their frequency tends to increase during the celebration with negative, and sometimes, deadly consequences. In
the photograph below, two young men on stilts carry signs that read “Listen is my plan against (child) abuse” and “Respect: It’s my plan against (child) abuse” (Fig. 75). Another man carries a similar sign that reads “Understanding: It’s my plan against (child) abuse.” Although the signs are simple, they convey a strong message. Note the use of Colombia’s flag as background for the banners and use of Colombia and Barranquilla’s soccer teams’ uniforms by the men on stilts. By using patriotic symbols and soccer-themed costumes, they get people’s attention and hope to get the message to the public.

Fig. 75. Young men in stilts, campaign against child abuse, Gran Parada de Fantasía, 2006. Photo by Francine Birbragher.
One of the messages the government tries to get across on a yearly basis is that people should not consume illegal liquor. Home distilled or smuggled liquor is cheaper than that purchased in tiendas or liquor stores, but it may be poisonous or cause illness. The mini-float sponsored by the Alcaldía del Atlántico urges people not to consume illegal liquor known as cococho (Fig. 76). It features a skeleton as the symbol of death, a possible consequence for those who dare to drink cococho. Interestingly, the float is sponsored by Cerveza Águila, one of the main financial supporters of carnival celebrations (notice the advertisement on the tent on the right hand side of the photograph and the banners illustrated on photographs included above such as figures 50, 51, 52, and 74). It is certainly in the best interest of the beer company to prevent people from purchasing illegal alcohol. As for the government, in addition to caring for people’s health, it also cares about the financial consequences of illegal liquor sales. People who buy cococho are buying liquor without the government’s stamp hence they do not pay taxes. Besides the social message of the campaign, there is an economic interest for both the government and the private sector.
In conclusion, carnival and politics have always been interrelated. Although carnival is transgressive by nature, in Barranquilla’s case it has been manipulated and used to the government’s advantage in many different ways. From transforming spontaneous popular festivals into staged spectacles, to controlling events and spaces and using the celebration to promote government-led campaigns, carnival has been used by the dominant class to manage and control society. Politicians have also used carnival to
their advantage, and although in the past twenty years it has been somehow “de-
politicized,” political candidates still take advantage of the occasion to promote their
campaigns during elections’ time.

But carnival is after all a popular celebration, and although it is carefully planned,
implemented and controlled, it is carnival after all. The celebration provides spaces for
expression and criticism. Some carnival manifestations document historical facts that are
represented by dances and costumes. Others, like the letanías, constitute a valuable
source of oral history that year-after-year record political, economic, and social realities
with poignant criticism and humor. Carnival has also provided a vehicle to denounce and
reject perhaps the crudest reality experienced by the country: political violence. Although
the festivity allows people to disconnect from daily life, violence has such a strong
presence in people’s lives that not even the most festive occasion can ignore it.

Images and Social Testimonies

From a social perspective, carnival images provide a rich source of information.
For example, photographs taken throughout the years illustrate the city’s demographic
growth. Their analysis also provides interesting information regarding class divisions and
the diverse character of the population. Carnival’s inclusive nature, which somehow
mirrors the city’s historic tradition of welcoming all, is clearly documented through
photographs as is the participatory character of the celebration.

Photographs taken during the parades throughout the twentieth and twenty-first
centuries show a dramatic increase in the number of carnival participants, both actors and
spectators that in turn reflect the city’s demographic growth. Two images taken during
the Batalla de Flores in 2005 and 2012 speak for themselves. The first one features Carnival Queen Kathy Flesch Guinovart riding a float at the Vía 40 (Fig. 77). There are people everywhere, on the palcos, on the street and even between the vehicles. The place looks overwhelmingly crowded. Except for the individuals riding the floats and some representatives from the Policía Militar and the press located on the lower-right corner of the picture, it is impossible to distinguish people individually. The scene is visually one of a mob.

Fig. 77. Carnival Queen Kathy Flesch Guinovart, Batalla de Flores, 2005. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Lola Salcedo.

The second photograph shows a different scenario (Fig. 78). Taken in 2012 from the top of one of the music trailers during the Batalla de Flores, the image provides a clear view of both sides of the Vía 40 with the palcos to the left and the mini-palcos on the right, both filled to capacity. The Marimondas del Barrio Abajo, carnival’s largest comparsa
with more than six hundred participants, danced in the streets. This photograph shows an orderly and controlled scene. All the viewers are confined to the enclosed spaces built to contain them, while the dancers have the street all to themselves to perform their colorful spectacle.

Fig. 78. Batalla de Flores, Cumbiódromo, Vía 40, 2012. Photo by Sharon Rozencwaig.

Both images illustrate how during carnival parades the Vía 40 is filled with millions of people who participate in the celebration as actors and spectators. The multitudinous event reflects Barranquilla’s continuous demographic growth -according to the Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadistica (DANE), Barranquilla currently has 1.2 million inhabitants- and the presence of an increasing number of tourists that visit the city every year during carnival times.

Although these two pictures were taken only seven years apart, they show contrasting scenarios. The main difference is that prior to the installation of the mini-palcos in 2008, spectators were allowed to gather on the street. They were able to approach the floats and the trailers to see the queens and showbiz personalities and they sat on the curbside to watch the parade. Unfortunately, as illustrated in the first photograph (Fig. 78), there was not enough space for the large amount of people who gathered at the Vía 40 so people stood in the street, making it difficult for dancers to perform. The crowds were so numerous that it was also impossible for the authorities to control them or move them to the sides.

In 2008, the Fundación Carnaval de Barranquilla installed fenced mini-palcos on the northern side of the Vía 40. While this step may have resolved the problem from the organizers’ perspective, the general public was not pleased. By installing palcos and mini-palcos, the Fundación Carnaval de Barranquilla took away the spaces where parades could be seen for free. Although there were some spaces left along the street for those who could not afford to pay the prices of the palcos and the mini-palcos, these were not large enough to fit the crowds.

The Cumbiódromo transformed the public space where carnival parades took place into a profitable, organized and controlled scenario. This is clearly illustrated in the second photograph (Fig. 78). On the left of the picture are the palcos, where people who can afford to purchase tickets, locals and tourists, sit in shaded areas and enjoy the parade while drinking, eating and dancing to live music. Palcos can get crowded but everyone can see the spectacle thanks to the structure’s elevation. On the right are the mini-palcos designed to accommodate smaller groups and to provide an alternative for those who
cannot afford the prices of the palcos. Although the mini-palcos are also covered, they receive the afternoon sun, making the viewing experience a little less comfortable. They are smaller than the palcos and are built at street level which allows actors who stop by to mingle with the public during the parades. This kind of spectator-actor interaction can be seen on the lower right corner of the photograph where the female who impersonates a crazy woman during carnival times known as “La Loca” is teased by the people who look at her from the stands (Fig. 78).

A close-up of “La Loca” shows a dirty woman with messy hair, tight rags and two cones simulating bare breasts. She wears old shoes and drags empty pots behind her when she walks, making loud annoying sounds. Her appearance is vulgar and scary. With her looks and her attitude –she goes around screaming and cursing- she transgresses social norms. The fact that she does it during carnival allows her to escape social controls. With her characterization of a crazy woman, she exemplifies what literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin defines as the “grotesque”\(^\text{28}\) (Fig. 79).

\(^{28}\) Bakhtin, 303-367.
In this picture, “La Loca” is holding a plate of food. It is not unusual for people to share food or drinks. Photographs illustrate these and other types of interaction that occur between the public and the actors during the parades. Despite the fact that for the most part of the Vía 40 actors and spectators are separated by fences, they manage to talk, to take pictures and to share snacks and beverages. The interactive nature of carnival is
transformed and limited but not eliminated. The barriers are intended to prevent the public from taking over the street, not to avoid contact.

In the photograph included below, Jairo Cáceres Julio, Rey Momo, is shown at the Vía 40 greeting people and taking pictures during the Gran Parada de Tradición, in 2011 (Fig. 80). The figure of the Rey Momo or Rey de Burlas appeared in Barranquilla’s carnival celebrations in the nineteenth century but was discontinued for most of the twentieth century. It was reinstated in 1995 to recognize individuals who, like Cáceres Julio, director of the groups Nacimientos de Palenque and Angelitos Negros, have devoted their lives to the festivities. Cáceres Julio has been involved with carnival since the 1960s and has successfully directed several dances that enrich its cultural heritage. His Rey Momo costume, inspired by his African ethnic roots, symbolizes his royal status. He carries a scepter with a tiger head and a European-like royal band with the words Rey Momo written on it. The hat and the snake-like animal-patterned belt are inspired by African traditional fashions.

Over the years, many individuals have been honored during the celebrations for maintaining carnival traditions on a very personal level. The fact that those honored as Rey Momos, as in the case of Cáceres Julio, are clearly not part of the city’s established elites says something not only about the spirit of “inversion” common to carnival celebrations, but about Barranquilla’s “multicultural” civil society and the prominence of several popular sector groups during carnival celebrations. From this perspective, Barranquilla is something of a distinctive case compared to other Colombian cities.

The presence of Rey Momo in Barranquilla’s carnival symbolizes the “inversive” dimension of society in carnival celebrations. In theory, during carnival times “the poor is

29 De la Espriella, 180.
the king.” In this case, Cáceres Julio not only represents the poor, but also Afro-Colombians who, despite being a majority in Barranquilla and the Caribbean region, occupy the lower level of the socio-economic spectrum. Thanks to his royal status, Cáceres Julio transgressed social hierarchies and got his moment of fame. He received countless ovations from the public and received the recognition from the media for his role as Rey Momo and keeper of Afro-Colombian cultural traditions.

The title Rey Momo is particularly significant in his case because Cáceres Julio has a connection with the Palenque de San Basilio, a maroon community whose inhabitants are considered by many to be at the “lowest level” of the Afro-Colombian population hierarchy. Cáceres Julio took advantage of his nomination and rose to the occasion proudly personifying an African King, dressed in a flashy costume decorated with feathers and prints and a scepter topped with a carved lion/tiger head.

Cáceres Julio’s nomination was also very timely. As Tianna S. Paschel indicates in her article “The Right to Difference: Explaining Colombia’s Shift from Color Blindness to the Law of Black Communities,”30 prior to the 1990s, Colombia, like most of Latin America, was “color-blind.” In 1991, Colombia adopted a new constitution that recognized the country as “pluri-ethnic” and “multicultural,” and established protections for the country’s ethnic and cultural diversity. Through Transitory Article 55, the constitution also mandated the subsequent adoption of Law 70 1993, or the Law of Black Communities. According to Paschel, this is the most comprehensive legislation for black populations in Latin America. Interestingly, Afro-Colombians constructed their claims in

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terms of culture and ethnic difference. Although Cáceres Julio was not active in the black movements that successfully mobilized for ethno-racial rights, he represented the ethnic and cultural expressions that led to the recognition of the black community as an ethnic group.

Fig. 80. Jairo Cáceres Julio, Rey Momo 2011, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2011. Photo by Francine Birbragher.

As previously mentioned, despite being separated by fences, people have many opportunities to relate to each other. It is common for carnavaleros to respond to people’s requests to get closer so they can greet them and take pictures. In some cases, carnival actors ask for money or food in return. In the following photographs, a young Congo shows its small doll to a couple of tourists (Fig. 81), and a Marimonda greets members of his family who are watching the parade from the bleachers (Fig. 82). Despite the divisive effect of the Cumbiódromo there are still opportunities for people
from different socio-economic classes to interact and blur established categories during carnival parades.

Fig. 81. Gran Parada de Tradición, 2012. Photo by Sharon Rozencwaig.
Since the creation of the Cumbiódromo (1991), the temporary stage built along the Vía 40 to accommodate hundreds of thousands of spectators who attend carnival parades on a yearly basis, it has been highly criticized. Some people believe that carnival should not focus on staged parades but rather on spontaneous manifestations. Others regret that this particular setting does not allow unobstructed interaction between actors and viewers. Many complain that spectators from the popular classes have been excluded from the site completely while others believe the Cumbiódromo reinforces class divisions, since admittance to the palcos is determined by the purchase of tickets available only to those who can afford them. Palcos’ ticket prices can be very costly. A travel agency promoting tours for next year’s carnival (2013) is offering individual three day passes (Saturday, Sunday, and Monday) for $260,000 pesos (US $152) and a
premium package for $533,000 pesos (US $313) which also includes admittance, food and alcoholic beverages.\textsuperscript{31} Prices between palcos may vary slightly, but they are the same for locals and tourists. Considering that the minimum wage in Colombia is $566,700 pesos and that 57.5\% of the country’s workers earn one minimum wage or less than that, it is clear that palcos are out of reach for the popular classes.\textsuperscript{32}

During a celebration that in theory should erase socio-economic class distinctions, the Cumbiódromo’s setting reinforces them by putting the elite “above” all at the palcos’ raised bleachers, the middle class on the palcos, mini-palcos, or rented chairs, and the poor in the little space left along the way or on the curbside, when allowed. While the organizers see the Cumbiódromo as the best possible formula to accommodate hundreds of thousands of people who wish to be part of the celebration and to control the crowds that had become a nuisance to the spectacle taking place at the Vía 40, the fact is that this setting is clearly divisive. This arrangement regularizes carnival’s former “transgressive” disorder by setting spatial limits for different socio-economic classes and facilitates the presentation of a carnival designed as a civic and commercial spectacle.

Despite the spatial arrangement, people manage to transgress the norms by organizing their own parties within the new spaces. The Carnaval de Barranquilla’s parades are not events where the public sits down to watch a spectacle. Each individual - local or tourist- who attends is a carnavalero, a carnival actor in his or her own right. Disguised or not, he or she laughs, dances, drinks, and plays while others perform on the street. As the slogan says, “\textit{quien lo vive es quien lo goza}” (he who experiences it enjoys

\textsuperscript{31} http://www.ucrostravel.com/carnaval-de-barranquilla.php (accessed September 30, 2012)

\textsuperscript{32}http://www.elespectador.com/economia/articulo-316793-salario-minimo-2012-sera-de-566700 (accessed September 30, 2012)
An example of the viewers’ *carnavalesque* participation is the custom of throwing Maicena (corn flour) or *espuma* (foam) as part of the celebration. Throwing water and flour as a form of transgression is an ancient tradition that dates from medieval carnivals and is very much alive in Barranquilla’s carnival celebrations despite continuous efforts by the government to prohibit it. Being soaked with foam or covered with corn flour is not a pleasant experience, but people enjoy this popular custom and are willing to play the game (Fig. 84).

Fig. 83. *Mini-palco*, Batalla de Flores, 2012. Photo by Sharon Rozencwaig.

Individuals of all ages, social classes, and ethnic backgrounds, gather together at the Vía 40 to enjoy the celebration and to applaud the people who perform on the street. In some cases, the rails are moved by the public or by guards who become accomplices and enjoy seeing the reactions that lead to the spontaneous encounters between spectators and actors. Erasing the physical boundaries constitutes a form of transgression but also a
form of integration. By crossing the limits and dancing with the actors, the spectators become actors, blurring the differences between them. This is illustrated in a photograph included below, depicting a young man who decided to dance with a *cumbiambera* during the Gran Parada de Tradición. If it was not for the outfit he could easily blend in as he was not only a good dancer but he also had the sombrero *vueltiao* on hand (Fig. 84). This scene is extremely common despite police controls. Both actors and spectators enjoy these spontaneous encounters that remind them of the temporary suspension of rules during the festive celebration.
Like physical boundaries, class divisions can also be temporarily erased. The majority of carnival actors come from neighborhoods whose residents belong to the middle or lower classes, but it is not unusual for members of the upper class to join them in dances or *comparsas*. An example can be seen among the Marimondas del Barrio.
Abajo, who for the past twenty years have included politicians, businessmen, and diplomats in their performances. According to Jaime Abello Banfi, director of the Fundación Nuevo Periodismo Iberoamericano,

In Barranquilla, ancestral poverty has been transmuted into cultural heritage. Carnival has provided a sense of belonging and has transformed into collective heritage folk traditions transmitted through generations within families with low incomes and few material possessions. In a country that has been affected by violence, this Carnival is an exceptional space for peaceful coexistence, tolerance and cultural diversity. The fact is that in Barranquilla the poor, the middle class and the rich have been able to share the dance, the gaiety and pride, and to have a lasting intangible heritage, a magical parenthesis that deceptively de-stratifies social life.33

Being an elected, high ranked, government official did not prevent Governor Eduardo Verano (2008-2011) to participate in the Batalla de Flores as a member of the Marimondas del Barrio Abajo during the 2009 carnival celebrations (Fig. 85). This is not unique to Barranquilla’s festivities. In New Orleans’ Mardi Gras, for example, Mayor Mitch Landrieu led the Krewe of Zulu Parade in 2012. The difference is that while in New Orleans the mayor participated as a government official and occupied a place of honor, in Barranquilla the mayor walked surrounded by the rest of the Marimondas, with no other distinction than being escorted by a security guard for safety reasons. He did not ride on a float nor lead the comparsa. He walked and danced on the street as a true carnavalero. Governor Verano mingled with other members of the group and strolled through the Vía 40 until he arrived to the palco VIP, where he greeted the rest of the parade’s participants wearing the Marimonda costume.

Fig. 85. Eduardo Verano, Governor of the Departamento del Atlántico, participating as a Marimonda, Batalla de Flores, 2009. Photo by Francine Birbragher.

Social mixing occurs during the parades in very subtle ways. Members of all socio-economic classes participate in danzas, comparsas, and cumbiambas, wearing the same outfits and dancing to the same rhythms. It is hard to distinguish them unless they take off their masks, take out part of their outfits, or fail to follow the dance steps. Other than that, everybody looks and acts the same. In the next picture for example, a woman dressed as an Indian is surprised by a Marimonda who spontaneously begins to dance with her (Fig. 86). What identifies him from being from a different socio-economic class is the fact that he carries an expensive camera and he is not wearing the mask, the vest or the tie. A “real” Marimonda from the Barrio Abajo does not parade without them. As for the woman, nothing seems to indicate what socio-economic class she belongs to. She
wears a brand new beautiful costume accessorized with new custom jewelry and a feather headdress. The only fact that suggests she belongs to a different socio-economic class is that very few elderly individuals from the elite participate in the parades and those who do generally ride on trailers or floats.

Fig. 86. Marimonda and Indian, Batalla de Flores, 2009. Photo by Francine Birbragher.
One has to look very closely to identify members of the elite during carnival parades. The fact that Barranquilla’s society is characterized by its openness towards class mobility makes it even more difficult to identify individuals’ socio-economic background, particularly among the members of the *cumbiambas* and *comparsas*. Unless one knows them personally it is difficult to identify them. Even among the spectators, it is sometimes difficult to differentiate them as everyone dresses in a similar manner, usually with shorts or jeans and t-shirts with carnival designs. On rare occasions an unexpected detail such as carrying a Prada purse (or perhaps a copy) may give one away! (Fig. 87)
Photographs provide visual testimonies that document the participation of people of different social classes, ethnic backgrounds, ages, and gender preferences in the Carnival de Barranquilla. Young and old, straight and gay, and even people with disabilities participate not only in specific events planned for their enjoyment such as the
Carnaval de los Niños or the Guacherna Gay, but also in the main parades. The Carnaval de Barranquilla is truly a spectacle that integrates all members of society in an expression of diversity that follows the characteristics of the universal carnival but also mirrors Barranquilla’s society.

It is particularly admirable to see elderly people participate in Carnival celebrations (Fig. 88). Most of them have done it since they were children or young adults. Some are members of traditional groups such as Congos and cumbiambas and others belong to special groups organized for seniors also known as the “tercera edad.” Not surprisingly, they are greeted with enthusiasm and admiration. It is hard to believe they have the strength and the energy to rehearse and walk for miles so they can be part of the celebration. Their presence in the parades challenges people’s misconceptions about older people’s physical and mental conditions. For many, participating in the parades keeps them going the whole year long. Their participation in carnival parades also mirrors their active role in Barranquilla’s society, where traditionally the elders are not only respected but also active participants of family and community’s daily life.
Another group that illustrates the inclusive nature of the celebration is the gay community. The participation of homosexuals in carnival’s events is not new. As Alfonso
Fontalvo recalled, they were part of the *Congos* before women were able to join.\textsuperscript{34} For many years, the gay community has organized its own carnival events such as the Guacherna Gay, a music spectacle and the crowning of the Gay Queen and Gay Momo King, in addition to participating in carnival’s official parades (Fig. 89). Unfortunately their presence in the festivities does not necessarily mean they are accepted by the community at large. According to Wilson Castañeda Castro, director of the Corporación Caribe Afirmativo which promotes the rights of the local gay communities, after Cali, Barranquilla is the city where more homosexuals have been assassinated in Colombia in the past five years because of their sexual preferences.\textsuperscript{35} Despite the fact that historically the local community has been open to newcomers, gay people have not been necessarily welcomed by all. One may speculate that this has to do with the chauvinistic character of the *costeño* or the fact that being a Catholic country, their sexual orientation is not accepted by many. Carnival provides a unique opportunity for the gay community to be included temporarily as members of the local society.

\textsuperscript{34} Alfonso Fontalvo, interviewed by the author, November, 2005.

Some of the groups that elicit the most applause and admiration during the parades are those formed by children and adults with special needs. The group Ilusiones del Caribe features individuals with Down syndrome who enjoy dancing and look forward to participating every year in carnival parades (Fig. 90). Their presence proves that carnival is a celebration from all for all.
Children play a fundamental role in the Carnival de Barranquilla. In addition to having their own Carnaval de los Niños during the pre-carnival season, they participate with their parents and grandparents in Congos, Cumbias, Garabatos, Marimondas and other popular expressions during carnival parades (Fig. 91 and Fig 92). Children seem to carry carnival in their blood. They are born with it, they live it and they have the responsibility to assure its continuation. Most of the traditional carnival expressions are transmitted from generation to generation which is why it is not uncommon to see grandparents holding hands with their grandchildren during different carnival events or to have two and three generations participate together during carnival parades.
Fig. 91. Children, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2007. Photo by Francine Birbragher.

Fig. 92. Congo fauna represented by children, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2008. Photo by Francine Birbragher.
From a sociological perspective, I have shown how photographs provide valuable information regarding carnival’s interactive and participatory character and how they illustrate some examples of transgression and symbolic inversion. Most important, images “humanize” the theoretical analysis as they put faces to the otherwise “invisible” individuals who are responsible for keeping alive carnival’s cultural expressions.

Carnaval and Cultural Patrimony

Photographs also constitute a valuable source for the cultural analysis of the celebration. They can document, for example, carnival’s use of the public space. Images are particularly valuable in documenting the Carnaval de Barranquilla’s unique patrimony: its rich and varied cultural traditions and esthetic expressions. Photographs also illustrate the strong sentiment of regional and national identity expressed by the carnavales during the celebration.

Since the organization of the first Batalla de Flores in 1903, parades and other carnival events have been staged in different areas of the city. From the Callejón Abello, to the Avenida Olaya Herrera, to the Barrio El Prado, to the Vía 40, parades have followed Barranquilla’s urban growth as new and larger spaces have been required to accommodate the increasing number of participants. These shifts have not been easily accepted by carnival participants for many reasons. Moving the events away from the city center and the neighborhoods where the popular carnival began is a clear demonstration of the transformation of carnival from popular expression to commercial spectacle. No longer spontaneous expressions of symbolic inversion and transgression, organized official events follow a program that needs appropriate stages for its implementation. Another issue is transportation. By moving the parades far away from the residential
areas, individuals are forced to travel long distances in a city that does not provide adequate public transportation, particularly during carnival times. Many participants need to walk several miles prior to walking and dancing in the parades and do the same after the parade finish, sometimes two and three days on a row.

Unfortunately, the Vía 40 is the only public space large enough to fit millions of participants and spectators within the urban perimeter of the city. The two-way four-lane street is transformed into a temporary open theatre featuring several areas of covered bleachers built on the southern side of the avenue; an open space for the parade on the northern roadway; and small bleachers spread out on the northern curbside of the avenue. Open spaces or bordillos are also available for viewers along the Cumbiódromo, which runs for approximately four kilometers.

Fig. 93. Cumbiódromo, Vía 40, Batalla de Flores, 2012. Photo by Sharon Rozencwaig.
This site contrasts dramatically with the Camellón Abello, depicted in the photograph from 1903 (Fig. 46). The Vía 40 is located in Barranquilla’s industrial area and not at the center of the city’s social life. Yet, during carnival celebrations, every inch of it is transformed into the main meeting place where locals and visitors alike celebrate a welcomed break from daily life in a joyful atmosphere.

Not all the spaces along the Cumbiódromo are filled with *palcos* and *mini-palcos*. Some areas are managed by individuals who rent chairs for a specific fee and others are simply filled by people who see the spectacle for free. All areas can become very crowded as illustrated in the photograph included below (Fig. 94). This corner is filled to capacity with children and adults, patiently waiting to see the parade. Unlike people in *palcos* or *mini-palcos*, there is no shade or organized seating. There is no control except for the fences that prevent the public from walking on to the street. A colorful garland, a jester hat and a banner with the word carnival hanging from the wall of the building behind add some touches to the festive spirit.
It is also common to see people in special viewing areas set up by the businesses and factories that border the Vía 40, such as the bleachers featured on the upper right hand side of the photograph included above (Fig. 94) or the tent placed on the roof of the beauty salon illustrated below (Fig. 95).
This photograph provides information regarding the use of urban spaces not only during carnival but also on a regular basis. The tent is located on the roof of a simple structure, a house built in Siape, a neighborhood that began as a barrio de invasion on the west end of the Vía 40. An interesting parallel can be established between the strategy to find a place to see the parade and a place to live when no housing alternatives are provided. The same parallel may be established from an economic perspective. The sign on the wall indicates the place is not only a home but also a beauty parlor, a response to the lack of opportunities in the formal sector.

In addition to showcasing a creative solution for watching the spectacle, this image documents the social aspect of parade viewing. People gather to enjoy the spectacle and to share a good time with family and friends. This temporary tented setting built on a house roof is shaded, which is very important considering the sun can...
be very strong, and provides unobstructed viewing. It also allows social interaction during the several hours the parade lasts, during which children and adults talk, eat, drink (notice the cooler in front of the individual wearing a yellow t-shirt), and even dance, in the festive atmosphere. Despite their lower socio-economic status, they managed to see the parade without having to pay while enjoying the same amenities as those who paid for seats on the *palcos*.

The following photograph shows a very different scenario of the Vía 40 (Fig. 96). It was taken on Carnival Tuesday, one day after the last parade had taken place. People are not hanging out on their roofs, partying or wandering around, but rather resting in their homes or attending the last events of the season in other areas of the city. Only taxis and trucks are circulating on the street, an indication of the commercial and industrial character of the area. As they dismantle the *palcos*, the only visible reminders of the carnival celebration that ends on that day are the banners of Olímpica supermarkets and Cerveza Águila hanging from the light posts, a reminder that by the twentieth century, carnival had become a commercial-driven spectacle.
Fig. 96. Vía 40, general view, February 17, 2010. Photo by Francine Birbragher.

Despite the fact that by the end of the twentieth century the celebration had been transformed into a commercial spectacle, the Carnaval de Barranquilla continues to constitute the main keeper of the region’s diverse cultural traditions. As Jaime Abello suggests, it is in the richness of these expressions that the true wealth of Barranquilla’s carnival resides.

To understand the folkloric richness of this Carnival, it is necessary to emphasize that, demographically and culturally, Barranquilla has received and integrated human input from the whole Colombian Caribbean region. We speak of a territory whose culture and ethnic composition constitutes a historical mixture of the original indigenous people; colonizers, mostly from Southern Spain; and a distinctive and strong African influence, brought by the slaves and their descendants. And although poverty and income inequality have been historical characteristics of this region, they have been offset by a vital attitude and some degree of melancholy, and
with a kind of libertarian and egalitarian spirit that underlie the psychosocial basis of a magnificent and dignifying popular culture.\textsuperscript{36}

The fact that Cartagena was the main port of entry to the region for slaves coming from Africa during the Colonial period,\textsuperscript{37} and that Barranquilla emerged as a sitio de libres inhabited by maroons and free slaves, explains why La Arenosa and the Caribbean region in general are so rich in Afro-Colombian cultural expressions. Dances and music inspired by African roots constitute the core of the Carnaval de Barranquilla’s cultural heritage. Photographs of thousands of participants of carnival’s parades illustrate not only the physiological traits of the Afro-Colombian population that continues to inhabit the Caribbean coast, but also their rich patrimony transmitted through danzas and comparsas.

An obvious reference to Afro-Colombian ethnicity can be seen in the costumes and make-up of thousands of dancers inspired by African fauna (Fig. 97). Lions, tigers, leopards and elephants are represented in facial and body designs, skillfully made masks and accessories worn by the carnavales. It is also common to see costumes based on animal prints including leopard and zebra patterns, and trimmings of bones and beads. These elements must be considered as part of the African inspired masquerade. According to Judith Bettlheim, John Nunley and Barbara Bridges,

The African sensibility of the masquerade is also a major focus of (Caribbean) festival arts. Despite their different tribal origins, Africans in the Americas understood and practiced the masquerade, which combined music, dance, costume, sculpture, and drama in a single performance. Traditional African aesthetics also can be characterized as assemblage. In the motherland, animal and human bones, raffia, beads, shells, horns, metal, and imported cloth might all appear in a single masquerader. The

\textsuperscript{36} Abello, 20.

\textsuperscript{37} Bushnell, 40.
slaves brought these well-tested institutions with them, and despite the break-up of families and tribal affiliations, they retained this aesthetic dimension.\(^{38}\)

The use of masks and masking activities in the Carnaval de Barranquilla deserves further study, not only from the aesthetic perspective but also from the perspective of social relations. As Gerard Aching indicates, it is important to examine the relations between observers and masked subjects to comprehend how masking activities mediate social relations within and outside carnival.\(^{39}\)

Another theoretical approach to the masquerade involves carnival’s analysis from the perspective of performance and ritual. The fact that dancers who perform to African inspired rhythms are semi-naked or use minimal covering can be explained from this standpoint. According to anthropologist Victor Turner, rituals such as rites of passage have three phases: separation, margin and aggregation. The margin or “limen” is an ambiguous state in which the neophytes are neither “here nor there.” The use of minimum clothing by most carnival dancers performing African inspired rhythms (Figures 97, 98, 99 and 100) and the stage of trance they may attain during their performances are representative of what Turner describes as the ritual’s “liminal” stage.\(^{40}\)

Another symbol of this “liminal” stage is the feathered mask, such as the one depicted below (Fig. 97). According to Fu-Kiau Bunseki, founder of the Kongo Academy in Kumba in Bas-Zaïre, “Masks with feathers symbolize flying beings. A feathered


person is a tangible being and a spiritual force. Although the feathered masker is walking or parading, the inner person within that feathered radiance flies in his mind to other worlds.”41

Fig. 97. Dancer, Raíces de Nueva Colombia, Gran Parada de Fantasía, 2006. Photo by Francine Birbragher.

Birds and other animal references are not the only visual symbols of Afro-Colombian ethnicity. The use of skillfully carved and painted masks is inherited from enslaved Africans and their descendants who have passed on the tradition from generation to generation. In the photograph below, the dancer represents the Lion, king of the African jungle, and carries on his head a beautifully carved mask and a scepter topped with a lion head (Fig. 98). Masks, made of wood or papier maché, complement the face and body-paint and transform the dancer’s body not only into a carnivalesque being, but also into a ritualistic symbol.

Wearing a costume indicates a corporeal transformation, an inversion from daily life. In this particular case the individual exposes his torso; his nakedness can be interpreted as a form of transgression. The fact that the man chooses to personify a lion also suggests a social inversion, the transformation of a common individual into a powerful symbolic figure, the “king” (of the jungle). In addition, through dance and performance this man and thousands of other dancers performing Afro-Colombian choreographies in the Carnaval de Barranquilla, preserve and strengthen their Afro-Colombian identity.
Complementing the masks and costumes, Afro-Colombian ethnicity is also represented in carnival parades through specific forms of music and dance. According to historian John Charles Chasteen, one particular dance move, “the lateral hip movement that ‘breaks’ the body’s vertical line and, rhythmically side to side, produces a sinuous, flowing motion of the dancer’s torso,” is directly inherited from original African
dances. The female depicted below illustrates this movement, “breaking” to the rhythm of the drums that follow her closely as depicted in the back of the picture (Fig. 99). Furthermore, the image transmits the energy and enthusiasm of the young woman.

Fig. 99. Dancer, Gran Parada de Fantasía, 2010. Photo by Francine Birbragher.

According to Chasteen, couple choreography was rare in Africa where, “in the dominant historical pattern, associated with sowing and reaping and hunting and war, men danced, or women danced, or entire communities danced, but only occasionally did couples dance. Something new and powerful happened when couple dancing met the

liberation of the lower body to create the dance-of-two. At carnival, African rhythms and “breaking” movements common among groups with strong African ethnic roots are commonly performed by couples who dance along the way in a sexual, provocative, and flirtatious way (Fig. 100)

Fig. 100. Dancers, Comparsa Fantasia Africana, Ekobios, Cartagena, Gran Parada de Fantasía, 2011. Photo by Francine Birbragher.

43 Chasteen, 13.
Music and dance go hand in hand so it is just natural that African-based dance movements are performed to the rhythm of drums and other percussion instruments. Drums are the basis for all Colombian Caribbean rhythms performed during carnival including *cumbia, porro, fandango, puya*, and *bullerengue*. During the parades, most groups are accompanied by live music performed by local groups including *papayeras* and *millos*, and all of them, without exception, include one or several drummers (Fig. 101).

Fig. 101. Drummer, Gran Parada de Fantasia, 2006. Photo by Francine Birbragher.
The group of musicians depicted below accompanies Ekobios, a comparsa that, as its name indicates, is inspired by African roots. Not only do they perform to the sounds of African rhythms, but they also wear costumes influenced by contemporary African fashions (Fig. 71). This idea of identification with both traditional and contemporary African elements illustrates the fact that the dancers’ association with their Black identity is not only a romantic yearning for the past, but uses cultural expressions to promote their organization as a minority socially and politically.

Fig. 102. Musicians, Comparsa Fantasía Africana, Ekobios, Cartagena, Gran Parada de Fantasía, 2009. Photo by Francine Birbragher.

One of the most powerfully symbolic examples of Afro-Colombian cultural expressions is the form known as the Danza de Congo, one of the most historic elements of the Carnaval de Barranquilla. According to the late folklorist Delia Zapata Olivella, these dances were first performed in ancient African Cabildos of Portobelo and Colón
(Panama), and Cartagena de Indias (Colombia), during the colonial period. They were brought to Barranquilla by the descendants of the members of those Cabildos who migrated to the city in the nineteenth century. The Danza El Torito is one of the most traditional Congo dances of the Carnaval de Barranquilla (Fig. 103). The three men on the left of the photograph wear the Congo’s attire that includes turbans, makeup, and sunglasses. The man on the right is dressed in a torito (bull) costume. He carries a band with the name of the dance and a wooden bull mask with rattles. Note the bulls embroidered on the bibs of the other three dancers symbolizing the dancers’ identities.

All of the members of the Danza El Torito belong to the popular classes. The fact that costumes are generally made by their wives or by relatives explains why each individual outfit has distinctive details. The fact that one of the men on the picture is wearing broken glasses may be interpreted as a sign of his socio-economic status. Many of the members of the dance, including the one depicted on the left are very old. There is particular sense of pride and identity among the older members of the group. Those representing animals, especially the wild bull, are generally younger and more energetic, but they experience the same sense of pride as their elderly counterparts. Note the man on the left who is holding a beer. Drinking during the parades is part of the tradition. They drink to relieve thirst, to stay hydrated, and to get drunk. As they perform for the public, but they are also enjoying themselves.

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44 Portobelo and Colón were part of Colombia’s territory prior to Panama’s independence from that country, in 1903.

45 Cited in Proclamation of the Carnaval de Barranquilla as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, 68.
Another important ethnic component of the Carnaval de Barranquilla is represented by indigenous or “Indian” dances. Carnival’s indigenous cultural expressions gained special attention in the 1990s due to the fact that in 1991 the new Constitution recognized the linguistic, ethnic and cultural diversity of the country’s population and proclaimed, at least in theory, the judicial rights of its indigenous groups.46

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In 2009, the Cumbiamba La Arenosa honored the indigenous cultural legacy of Colombia’s Caribbean region by inviting representatives of the Kogui tribe to parade with them during carnival festivities. As documented by the following image, these indigenous people did not dance the Cumbia or perform during the parade. They simply walked along the Vía 40 as guests, and although the intention was to honor them, to many they probably looked out of place (Fig. 105).

47 The Kogui or Kogi tribe inhabits the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta (Fig. 76). At the time of the arrival of the Spaniards they were a city-based confederation but today they are organized as a village-based society led by spiritual leaders called Mamas. Armando Zambrano, director of the Cumbiamba La Arenosa discovered that the Kogi had a ritual dance that was similar to the choreography performed today by contemporary cumbiambas and decided to invite some of its members to join them during the parade in 2009. Armando Zambrano, interviewed by Miguel Salas, August 2012.
The groups who participate in carnival parades representing indigenous expressions are the Indios Farotos, the Indios de Trenza, and the Chimilas (Fig. 106). Their dances are inspired by rituals that were originally performed by natives who inhabited the Caribbean coast and the banks of the Magdalena River prior to the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors. Most members of carnival’s Danzas de Indios are in fact their direct descendants and still reside in small towns of the Magdalena department. Carnival
indigenous dances are named after the choreographies they represent or the tribes they originally came from. Each group has a distinctive choreography and costume, but all dancers move to similar rhythms. Indigenous communities are poor in material term with very limited funds, so their costumes are usually quite simple and cannot compete against other groups.

Fig. 106. Grupo folclórico y cultural Kosta Azul, Danza Indios Manzos, Playas Blancas, Guamal, Magdalena. Gran Parada de Tradición, 2007. Photo by Francine Birbragher.

While certainly present, compared to Afro-Colombian expressions, the Danzas de Indios pass almost unnoticed during carnival parades. There are not that many groups and each one is formed by a small number of dancers. The fact that there are many more
Afro-Colombian groups than indigenous ones in the Carnaval de Barranquilla is not surprising given Colombia’s demographics particularly in the Caribbean coast.

Although it is possible to identify specific indigenous and Afro-Colombian songs and dances, most cultural carnival expressions have mixed origins. Indeed, the combination of different ethnic elements is what enriches carnival’s cultural patrimony making it a truly unique celebration. Sociologist Mirtha Buelvas suggests that this intangible patrimony results from multi-ethnic rather than tri-ethnic traditions (European, African, indigenous). But for their part, common people still refer to their tri-ethnic roots, as illustrated by the term “triétnica” on the banner of the group from the Fundación Somos Colombia from Cereté, Córdoba province (Fig. 108).

Fig. 107. Alma Triétnica, Cereté, Departamento de Córdoba, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2011. Photo by Francine Birbragher.

The tri-ethic encounter that occurred during the colonial period inspired the most popular cultural expression of the Carnaval de Barranquilla, the *cumbiamba*. According to composer Antonio María Peñaloza, the *Cumbia* is the most representative music of Colombia’s Atlantic Coast and the basis for most regional rhythms.49 Most scholars believe its origins can be traced to the celebration of the Virgen de la Candelaria festivities in Cartagena. Slaves and free blacks danced to the *Cumbia*, a musical form of African descent, marked by beating drums. Indigenous people, belonging to the same social class, contributed to the dance with their own sounds played with *gaitas* and flutes, the same instruments used today by the music groups that accompany the *cumbiambas* during carnival parades (Fig. 108).

This is one of several examples of popular cultural manifestations that have survived over the centuries, despite attempts by the elites to "civilize" and modernize these autochthonous expressions. Their survival shows how this *mestizaje*, understood in a broader sense as the mixing or the union of two or more ethnic components, gave strength to its cultural expression, enriching it and assuring its continuity until today.

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49 Cited in *Proclamation of the Carnaval de Barranquilla as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity*, 90.
The *cumbiamba* results from the choreographic mixing of the three different cultures. Choreographically men represent black males and women represent indigenous females. The Spanish influence is present through the clothes and the dancers’ movements, which symbolize appropriate European-style behavior. Scholars agree that the dance constitutes a tri-ethnic expression and a testimony of a historical process that occurred beginning in the colonial period. The overwhelming participation of *cumbiambas* in the Carnaval de Barranquilla is also a testimony of the strong mixed-race component in the city’s demographics. The way the *Cumbia* is performed today in carnival parades is also an example of how a cultural expression with ritualistic origins has been transformed to accommodate carnival’s modern needs (Fig. 109).
Fig. 109. Cumbiamba La Revoltosa, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2012. Photo by Sharon Rozencwaig.

The Cumbia was a form of resistance against the Spanish regime during colonial times just as the “carnaval popular” was a form of resistance towards the dominant elite in the 19th century. In both cases the dance gave the cumbiamberos a sense of identity and an opportunity to socialize outside the realm of the dominant class. In the twentieth century, with the transformation of the celebration into more of a commercial spectacle, the dance was adapted to serve the requirements of the parade. While the cumbiamba changed in direction from circular form to linear displacement, it retained all its other characteristics. The dominant class succeeded in transforming one element of the choreography, but at the same time cumbiamberos succeeded in becoming not only the most represented traditional expression in the Carnaval de Barranquilla, but also Colombian’s national dance.
Pride and identity is precisely the last category I analyze in this chapter. Photographs are particularly valuable to recognize these traits. *Carnavaleros* identify themselves first and foremost as members of their groups. They are extremely proud and take their responsibilities very seriously. They are also very pleased with the recognition received by UNESCO and have embraced it as a unifying factor. *Barranquilleros* identify themselves with their customs, their traditions, their land and their popular culture expressions. This is made visible through the use during carnival of symbols like the city’s flag and the emblem of the local soccer team “El Junior de Barranquilla.” Finally, there is a very strong sentiment of national identity expressed in the display of the colors of Colombia’s flags and other national symbols by both spectators and participants alike.

Flags displayed during carnival parades are rich in information and meaning. These are usually hand-sewn or painted on fabric and include the name of the dance, its symbols, and/or the date of its foundation. Some of the groups are over one hundred years old. Longevity plays a significant role in the groups’ identities. *Carnavaleros* are very keen of historical memory and value tradition and continuity despite changes they may experience over time.

Being a flag bearer is an honor that is held with great pride. In the photograph included below a *Congo* carries the flag of the dance Congo Reformado which in addition to the name includes the expression “Carnaval Patrimonio Cultural” (Fig. 110). Traditional *carnavaleros* are extremely proud of the fact that UNESCO awarded the Carnaval de Barranquilla the title of Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. Three painted and fading decorations are featured on the center of the flag: a tiger on the left, the figure of a *Congo* dancer in the center, and a bull on the right, all
symbols of the *Congo* dance. The tiger symbolizes the dance’s African roots and its relationship with the African fauna, which has in its origins a mystical meaning. The bull, symbol of all *Congo* dances, represents the local fauna and the fact that the Caribbean region has been since colonial times a cattle area. The man in the middle represents the *Congo* himself, the dancer, the warrior, the individual but also the member of a tight community united by belonging to the dance.

Fig. 110. Roberto Osia (“Mocana”), Congo Reformado, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2009. Photo by Francine Birbragher.
Dance flags began playing a very important role in the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. As Alfonso Fontalvo, president of the Danza El Torito relates, “in the old days, the dances displayed their flag in front of the dance’s president’s home during the pre-carnival season. On carnival Sunday, Congo dancers carried their flags as they went to encounter other Congos and fought to take control of the other group’s flag. Some of the encounters were very bloody and even deadly. The flag was used as a battle symbol and the group that stole the other dance’s flag was considered the winner.”\textsuperscript{50} Today, Congo dances and other carnival groups still regard their flag as an essential symbol of their identity.

Banners and flags displayed during carnival parades are great historical sources, particularly when they provide information regarding the stories of the dances and/or their founders’. For example, it is customary for danzas and cumbiambas to display special banners featuring photographs and epitaphs that memorialize recently deceased presidents or directors. The leadership of the groups is generally passed from generation to generation, from fathers or mothers to sons or daughters, as an honor and a responsibility to continue the family’s tradition.

The following photograph shows the banner displayed in memory of Bernardo Guzmán Medina, director of the Cumbiamba El Gallo Giro (Fig. 111).\textsuperscript{51} The picture in the banner shows him dressed as a cumbiambero and identifies him as a past Rey Momo (2001). Instead of indicating his full name, the group uses the familiar expression “Viejo

\textsuperscript{50} Alfonso Fontalvo, interviewed by the author, February, 2005.

\textsuperscript{51} El Gallo Giro was originally founded in 1942. By the late 1970s it had ceased to appear in carnival events. In 1979, Bernardo Guzmán Medina, together with a group of friends from Las Nieves neighborhood, decided to organize a cumbiamba and to name it after the group that in the 1940s and 1950s was recognized for its “folkloric richness and enthusiasm.” Today, the cumbiamba is directed by Don Berna’s son, Enrique Guzmán. Enrique Guzmán, interviewed by the author, February, 2007.
Berna” (Berna is the short word for Bernardo) to acknowledge the fact that he was a familiar figure known personally by many *carnavaleros*. The epitaph reads “you will always live in our hearts.”

Fig. 111. Banner in memory of Bernardo Guzmán Medina, director of the Cumbiamba El Gallo Giro, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2007. Photo by Francine Birbragher.

Memorial banners such as this one indicate the important role tradition and historical memory play in the groups’ identities. By recognizing the passing of their leader, members of the dance acknowledge not only the respect they feel for his work and
dedication, but also illustrate the paternalistic sentiment prevailing in these organizations, a reflection of the same sentiment experienced at the community level in Barranquilla’s traditional society. Another important fact documented by the banner is the fact that Guzman was appointed Rey Momo in 2001. For the members of the dance this nomination recognized their director’s role as a carnival leader and as keeper of the Cumbia’s tradition.

A banner displayed in memory of Maritza López, founder of the Paloteo de Barranquilla dance, features a photograph of the deceased in full costume and reads as follows: “Maritza López H. (1934-2005), she is no longer with us but she will always live in our hearts. From this dance she was founder, member, and director. This year we perform in honor of what was her life. Live forever Maritza López and the Paloteo de Barranquilla 48 years of tradition.” Of the information provided, the sentence “what was her life” illustrates how much carnival means for most of the carnavaleros. Many of them truly devote their lives to their groups and look forward to their performances all year long. Another important fact is that this dance, as well as many others, has a long tradition of appearing in carnival events, in this case 48 years. The longevity of the traditional dances is an important fact to keep in mind when studying the carnival’s history. The banner is made in a very simple way, which illustrates the socio-economic status of the members of the dance. It was done by hand on a white board and decorated with two purple ribbons, a reference to the color worn by Catholic mourners. Members of the Paloteo de Barranquilla can be seen in the back, performing along the Vía 40 (Fig. 112).
Parades provide visual examples of people’s fervor for their regional and nationalist sentiments. Although this is generally the case of many festivals and celebrations all over the world, this element is particularly obvious in Barranquilla’s carnival parades in the twenty-first century. The manifestation of these sentiments through symbols has to be considered within a specific historical context. Since its
independence Colombia’s centralist government has promoted a national conscience among its citizens. This sentiment became more obvious during the industrialization and modernization of the country in the middle of the twentieth century and has acquired new dimensions in the era of globalization, particularly in cities like Barranquilla with economic ties to foreign countries and access to international media through Internet and satellite T.V.

Another reason for expressing a nationalistic sentiment during carnival is the fact that the popular traditions which are the core of the celebration have been appropriated as elements of the regional and national cultures. These new cultural policies deserve an independent study within the context of the “Multicultural/Multiethnic” character of the country as established by the Constitution of 1991. In the context of Barranquilla’s carnival, it is clear that the use of the colors of Colombia and Barranquilla’s flags in many different aspects of the celebration are an indication of a strong sense of local and national identity.

Colombia’s flag, its colors, shields and other national symbols can be seen in the costumes, accessories, make-up and musical instruments of thousands of members of the parading groups. It is common for dancers to display Colombia’s flag colors in the design of their costumes in very creative ways. The girl featured in the following photograph, for example, carries them on her clothes, her belt, the beautiful headpiece and the star-shaped stickers glued on top of her right eyebrow (Fig. 113).
Patriotic symbols such as maps and coats of arms are also commonly represented in carnival costumes as symbols of national pride. Some of them show very elaborate headpieces that not only illustrate a patriotic sentiment but also constitute a testimony of the talent and creativity of the local artisans. The following Congo was very creative in the making of his turban, which reproduces a tridimensional version of Colombia’s
complex coat of arms, including the Andean condor holding the olive branch at the top, two cornucopias filled with coins, fruits and a pomegranate, the Phrygian cap, and the isthmus of Panama with ships on each side (Fig. 114).

Fig. 114. Congo Reformado, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2012. Photo by Francine Birbragher.

It is important to note that not only photographs of carnival participants but also images of the general public illustrate people’s nationalistic sentiments. This man
waiting to purchase something at one of the tiendas of the Vía 40 wears a t-shirt with the colors of Colombia’s flag inscribed “Colombian 100 %” during one of the parades. The message says it all (Fig. 115).

![Image of a man wearing a t-shirt with the text "Colombianísimo 100%" during a parade.]

Fig. 115. Spectators, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2006. Photo by Francine Birbragher.

It is also common for individuals, to embroider symbols in their costumes. Although members of the Congos, Garabatos, and Marimondas wear the same basic outfits, they are allowed to affix additional decorations of their choice. In 2009, the costume of the Marimondas del Barrio Abajo was two sided so it looks like the back of
the costume depicted below is actually the front. The back of the vest is embroidered with both Colombia’s and Barranquilla’s flags, expressing a strong sense of identity with his city and his country (Fig. 116).

Fig. 116. Marimonda del Barrio Abajo, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2009. Photo by Francine Birbragher.

Many Marimonda costumes are filled with information. Since its creation, this particular carnival costume has allowed actors to convey messages by writing on their masks’ big ears. In recent years members of the comparsa have decorated not only the
ears but also the rest of the costume with many forms of writings and symbols. The photograph featured below was taken after the Batalla de Flores at the house of the group’s director, César “Paragüita” Morales. The individual is no longer wearing the mask but the back of the neck of the shirt identifies him as a member of the *Marimondas*. His vest reads “I am ‘costeño’ (from the Caribbean coast) 100 %.” The letters, written in the colors of Barranquilla’s flag surround the image of the *costeño*’s typical hat, the *sombrero vueltiao* another symbol of regional identity (Fig. 117).

![Fig. 117. Marimonda, 2007. Photo by Francine Birbragher.](image-url)
Even *cumbiambas*, which have more limitations about adding details to their costumes, manage to transmit a sense of local and national identity by using subtle details like colored fabrics, ribbons and accessories. The Cumbiamba La Arenosa, named after the city’s nickname, features beautiful *polleras* trimmed with delicate red, yellow and green ribbons, the colors of Barranquilla’s flag. Women wear headpieces made with red, yellow and green hibiscus, Barranquilla’s official flower, and men carry *mochilas* woven with the city’s flag and the name of the group. The man’s *sombrero vueltiao*, symbol of Caribbean identity, is a must for the *cumbiamberos* (Fig. 118).
In addition to having a strong sense of local and national identity, *barranquilleros* are fanatically devoted to the local soccer team, the “Junior de Barranquilla.” The team’s logo is commonly found embroidered in costumes, displayed in *Congo* turbans, and painted on dancers’ faces during carnival parades (Fig. 119).
The passion for the local soccer team begins at a very early age. The young boy depicted in the photograph below decorated his drum with a large logo which shows the six stars symbolizing the six times the team won the national championship (Fig. 120).
Fig. 120. Drummer, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2011. Photo by Francine Birbragher.

Conclusions

Thousands of photographs are taken every year by professional and amateur photographers during the celebration of the Carnaval de Barranquilla. Some of these images are used by journalists and reporters to illustrate articles in newspapers and magazines, while others are used by publicity agencies for future advertising campaigns and promotional materials. Scholars may use them to illustrate their research, and
publishers may feature them in “coffee table” books. Most pictures end in electronic files as personal souvenirs where they become valuable historical testimonies.

As I have suggested in this chapter, photographs provide valuable information for historical and multidisciplinary studies. Images illuminate a variety of issues such as demographics, the use of public spaces, race and gender relations, politics, economics, ethnic and cultural diversity. These pictures provide visual testimonies that, combined with oral testimonies and/or written sources when available, enrich the study of carnival from a multidisciplinary perspective.

Photographs are particularly valuable when analyzing the celebration and the society in which it takes place. They chronicle carnival parades that constitute expressions of cultural identities (both official and non-official) and reflect the social, political and economic contexts in which they occur. The images also record those spaces within carnival parades where criticism is allowed where participants are able to express themselves freely despite being in a controlled environment.

It is appropriate to mention the pitfalls of using photographs as historical sources. It is crucial to analyze who takes the pictures and what are the photographer’s intentions. It is also imperative to know what the images are intended for and who their audience will be. Most important, it is critical to carefully focus on the technical manipulation of the images, not an easy task in the age of digital photography and Photoshop.

Notwithstanding these qualifiers, photographs provide a unique opportunity for historians to discover valuable information on a subject that is extremely visual. Much can be written about the festivity, but only photographs can portray carnival’s visual aesthetics and begin to transmit the emotions and feelings it inspires (Fig. 121).
Written sources can rarely express the emotions and the feelings experienced during carnival times. Even the most skillful writer may have a hard time transmitting them with words. Photographers, on the other hand, are in a privileged position as they are able to capture those emotions and feelings and freeze them in time. A wonderful feeling of accomplishment occurs when these are recorded unexpectedly on a candid shot, one that was not planned but just occurred, like the one depicted in the following
photograph (Fig. 122). After several days of non-stop parading, dancing, partying, drinking and enjoying carnival, there is great satisfaction combined with a strong feeling of exhaustion. As cliché as it may sound, there is no question that, in this particular case, “a picture is worth a thousand words”…

Fig. 122. *Congo*, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2005. Photo by Francine Birbragher.
CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS

The Carnaval de Barranquilla is celebrated in a city that has a history unlike any other on Colombia’s Caribbean coast. It began as a sitio de libres and was built on the banks of the Magdalena River by individuals from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds who arrived in the area as early as the seventeenth century. Migration was and still is a fundamental factor in its demographic growth and has been influential in the ongoing transformation of its social and cultural networks.

Carnival’s oldest cultural expressions arrived in Barranquilla with the city’s first inhabitants of African and indigenous descent, and were later enriched with subsequent waves of migrants from Santa Marta, Cartagena, Mompox and the towns of the banks of the Magdalena River where carnival and Catholic festivities were celebrated since colonial times. At the end of the nineteenth century, local carnival traditions were complemented with those brought by immigrants arriving from Europe, the United States and the Caribbean, where carnival was celebrated during pre-Lent times.

Barranquilla’s development as an industrial, commercial and financial center during the first four decades of the twentieth century led to the consolidation of a hierarchical social organization flexible enough to allow upward mobility based on the individual’s economic success. As the local bourgeoisie grew stronger, it promoted the modernization of the city and played a leading role in the development of its cultural life, which included the organization of the official carnival events.
Different “modelos de gestión,” led by representatives of the gremios (local businessmen) and/or government officials were used during the twentieth century to manage the organization of carnival’s official events. Three of these “modelos” were benchmarks of this study to document the development of carnival’s organization and to analyze how the festival and its administration reflected the historical development of the city from the perspectives of politics, the economy and society.

Inspired by the first Batalla de Flores (1903), members of the elite took over the organization of carnival’s official opening parade which took place on a yearly basis on Carnival Saturday beginning in 1904. During the first four decades of the twentieth century, carnival involved two parallel celebrations: there were the private balls organized by and for the elite; and there was the “carnaval popular” celebrated in the barrios populares. The first “modelo de gestión” of the official parade was firmly in the hands the elite as the presidents of the Club Barranquilla and the committees were in charge of organizing its exclusive carnival balls. The organization of the Batalla de Flores was an extension of their duties and therefore was planned to fit their interests and their visions, which were highly influenced by European models and fashions.

By the beginning of the 1940s, the elite saw the need to organize and thereby control the “carnaval popular.” In place of a spontaneous expression of popular enjoyment, the “carnaval de barrio” was transformed into a carefully planned program that included parades, contests and salones populares. With the creation of the Junta Organizadora del Carnaval (1942), the elite took over total control of the city’s official carnival celebration. It implemented major changes including the election of the Carnival Queen among the young ladies of the local elite, the change of venue of the Batalla de
Flores, the election of popular queens in the poor neighborhoods, the organization of contests and the allocation of cash donations to the participating groups. The Junta Organizadora del Carnaval implemented a business-philanthropic oriented model that was used to control the popular classes and to model the celebration based on the elite’s ideals of order and progress. This “modelo de gestión” stayed in place until the government took over the organization of the festivities at the end of the 1940s. While the reorganization of Barranquilla’s carnival by the elites and run by the elites was relatively short-lived, the basic model of two carnivals under control from above was reinforced in subsequent decades by the governmental administration of the event.

During the second half of the twentieth century, Barranquilla suffered a strong economic decline. It also experienced political instability and felt the effects of violence caused by the national armed conflict and the rise of drug trafficking. Carnival was not immune to the city’s political, economic and social crises. From the 1950s to the 1980s, its organization was in the hands of different government organizations that in the end failed to keep up with the needs of a cultural space that had grown to be a massive and costly endeavor. Carnival had become the scenario where local and regional popular expressions were performed, and the ideal place to recreate on a yearly basis, the celebrations’ rich traditions. By the end of the 1980s, carnival was in need of a new type of “modelo de gestión” that would ensure its continuity.

In 1991, at the time a new national constitution was being written to fit the legal needs of Colombia’s society, a new institution took over the organization of carnival’s official events. Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. was conceived as a mixed-economy corporation in which the government and the private sector united forces to produce a
multi-event program to be implemented during the pre-carnival and carnival seasons. In the beginning, the institution of Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A., and particularly some of the changes it implemented, generated a strong rejection among carnival participants and the general public, but over the years its professionalism and the transparency with which it managed its finances earned the support of the majority of the carnival groups and individuals who make the events possible.

Today, Barranquilla’s carnival is not just a popular neighborhood celebration. It is a multitudinous festivity that features over thirty different pre-carnival and carnival official events, including three major parades staged at the Cumbiódromo. Planning such an ambitious program involves administrators, volunteers, subcontractors and hundreds of thousands of participants and spectators and requires a significant budget. For over twenty years, Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. and its Fundación Carnaval de Barranquilla have successfully organized and implemented an official program that, not without flaws, has allowed them to obtain the financial support of the public and the private sectors in addition to generating income on its own. From the economic perspective, Carnival has become a multimillion Colombian pesos business that produces a multitudinous spectacle.

From the cultural perspective, Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. has managed to provide a space where rituals and popular expressions are performed on a yearly basis. Although many carnival traditions have been transformed to fit the needs of the spectacle, the cumbia, for example, is no longer danced in circle but is performed moving forward, a significant number of carnival’s cultural expressions have managed to survive and to assure the continuation of popular manifestations that, according to García Canclini,
“express ways of living and visions of the world which in turn assure the continuity of social relations.”

Despite the transformation of the popular carnival into a commercial spectacle, the Carnaval de Barranquilla continues to provide a space for the safeguarding of a rich historical tradition which includes numerous danzas, comparsas and costumes. Despite been managed by members of the elite, it is still in essence, a “popular carnival,” from the perspective that popular cultural expressions constitute play the main role in carnival’s events. The Carnaval de Barranquilla is also an example of the temporary co-existence and survival of different ethnic groups, classes and socio-cultural crossings, particularly during the parades, but also a space where these differences are reinforced, particularly in the accommodation of the public on the palcos, mini-palcos or the street.

Carnival is a space where the traditional and the modern historically merge. Music, choreographies, costumes and other popular traditions may adopt some modern traits but, as García Canclini indicates, they still carry traditional values so they combine the old and the new. It is also a space where identities are formed, from both the dominant and the popular perspectives. Carnival can be seen as a space used by the dominant ideology to reinforce the current nationalistic sentiment of multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity, but also as a space of resistance used by the popular classes against the cultural politics of the State that intends to impose the culture of order and control their lives and social habits. For example, Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. may suggest specific guidelines for costumes worn by some of the groups to “maintain the tradition,” when in fact they do it to standardize the costumes and to provide a controlled and homogeneous

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1 García Canclini, 340.

2 Ibid. 343.
spectacle to the public. Some individuals and groups disregard the guidelines by
displaying, for example, subtle advertising signs on their outfits, putting their own
interests above the imposed rules. A clear example of resistance may be seen among the
Congos, who despite the prohibition of carrying live animals, manage to brake to rules by
parading with live roosters and snakes the way it was traditionally done by their ancestors.

As a “modelo de gestión” Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. has proven to be an
effective alternative for the administration of the official carnival events and has been
successful in ensuring the continuity of the celebration and its cultural richness. In
November 2012, its board had twenty members: four representing the local government
(Alcaldía de Barranquilla), ten representing the private sectors (Cámara de Comercio and
Fundación Mario Santo Domingo) and six representing the popular groups.³ Although we
do not know how the power relations function, there is clearly a participation of the
popular sectors in the organization’s leadership. By allowing the participation of three
members and three alternates representing the popular groups on its current board,
Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A. has evolved into a participatory alternative in which not
only the dominant sector’s but also the popular groups’ interests are taking into
consideration in the decision making process.

From a methodological perspective, I have emphasized the use of photography as
a historical source. Complemented by oral history and written documents, photographs
have provided a valuable resource for this project. The study of carnival’s historical
development through images allowed me to document how local dominant groups
imposed their ideals of progress, modernization and commercialization through their
“modelos de gestión.” Photographs were particularly helpful to illustrate the different

³ Information provided by Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A., November 29, 2012.
ways dominant and popular groups developed local and national identities within carnival’s context. Finally, the historical analysis of photographs showed how carnival was and still is a valuable space for the recreation of traditions and popular expressions that, in addition to constituting a rich and valuable cultural patrimony, mirror—sometimes in a distorted manner—the city’s political, social, economic and cultural realities.

Carnival is a rich and complex phenomenon. Further studies are necessary in several areas to continue its analysis and to understand its impact in the city's historical development. More research and scholarship is needed on topics such as the following: the historical participation of women in the development of the carnival; the impact of transnational influences and media on carnival; the role of carnival’s popular expressions in the preservation of Afro-Colombian ethnicity; resistance patterns of carnival actors and the popular sector towards the "modelos de gestión; masking and social relations within and outside carnival; the impact of urban development in the historical development of the Carnaval de Barranquilla; carnival and violence; and comparative studies of Colombian carnivals.

At a personal level, I intend to continue studying two of carnival’s most important popular expressions, the *Marimondas* and the Farotas of Talaigua. In addition, I will be working towards the organization of a new documentation center focusing on carnival studies that will be housed in the Casa del Carnaval in Barranquilla.
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APPENDIX

DANZAS, COMPARSAS, AND COSTUMES OF THE
CARNIVAL DE BARRANQUILLA

DANZAS

Cumbia

Fig. 123. Cumbiamba el Cañonazo, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2008.

1Unless otherwise indicated, the information provided in this section was taken from the dossier Proclamation of the Carnaval de Barranquilla as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, presented by the Presidency of the Republic of Colombia, the Ministry of Culture, the Fundación Carnaval de Barranquilla, and the Instituto Distrital de Cultura de Barranquilla, to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), June 2002. The order in which dances are presented follows the one suggested by Mirtha Buelvas in the Cartilla del Carnaval de Barranquilla [para grupos y disfraces] (Barranquilla: Ministerio de Cultura/Fundación Carnaval de Barranquilla).

2 All photographs in the Appendix were taken by the author unless otherwise indicated.
According to composer Antonio María Peñaloza, the Cumbia is the most representative rhythm of Colombia’s Atlantic Coast and the basis for most regional rhythms. Although several towns, including El Banco, Plato, Mompox, and Ciénaga claim its origins, most scholars believe these can be traced to the slaves’ celebration of the Virgen de la Candelaria festivities (February 2) which took place in Cartagena during colonial times.

Slaves and free blacks celebrated by dancing in a circle to a rhythm of African descent, the Cumbia, marked by beating drums. Indigenous people belonging to the same social class contributed to the dance with their own melodious sounds played with gaitas and flutes. The dance also resulted from mixing both cultures choreographically. Men represented black males and women indigenous females, a relationship that gave birth to the zambo. The Spanish influence was also present in the dance through the attire and the dance’s movements, which symbolize the appropriate courtship behavior from a European point of view. Scholars agree that the Cumbia dance constitutes a tri-ethnic cultural expression and a testimony of a historical process that occurred during the colonial period.

The Cumbia was originally danced clockwise in a circle, men inside and women outside. Women held a bundle of lit candles in their right hand and the rim of their long skirt with the left, moving it back and forward following the rhythm of the music. Musicians, located in the center of the circle played different types of drums including the tambor hembra, the tambor macho, and the tambora, in addition to maracas and flutes.

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3 Cited in Proclamation of the Carnaval de Barranquilla as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, 90.
The combination of the instruments and the way the rhythm is played today depends on the group’s geographical origins. Those from Sucre and Bolívar perform to *gaita* rhythms, while those from Atlántico use the *flauta 'e millo* (millet flute).

Fig. 124. Musicians, Cumbiamba La Gigantona, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2012.

While musicians continue to play in the same manner today, dancers had to modify the choreography in order to participate in carnival parades. No longer danced in a circle, they follow a linear pattern as they march forward in the same rhythmic way. Women continue to mark their rhythm by moving their hips side to side, taking very small steps and keeping their feet on the ground. Men move leaning forward, taking small steps with their right foot slightly raised, their arms extended towards their partners or upwards, and making pirouettes, jumps, or turns, to call their attention.
Fig. 125. Cumbiamba El Gran Carajo, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2007.

The Cumbia’s choreography is an expression of gallantry, a recreation of love conquest. Women flirt with their partners but keep them away by holding their skirts with their left hands and lit candles with their right hands. In addition to donning beautiful fitted dresses with very wide skirts known as “polleras,” women wear elaborate headpieces, earrings, necklaces and make-up. Men wear white pants and shirts, shawls known as “rabo e gallo,” sombreros vueltaos (typical hats from Colombia’s Caribbean coast) and mochilas (cloth bags).
Each *cumbiamba* is directed by its founder or by a relative who inherited it after the founder’s death. During the performance, the leaders or captains of the dance precede the rest of the group. The position of each couple depends on the length of time they have been part of the dance, their dancing abilities and family relationships.
Fig. 127. Cumbiamba La Misma Vaina, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2010.

Danza del Congo

Fig. 128. Danza Toro Grande de Rebolo, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2011.
The Danza del Congo is the most popular traditional dance of the Carnaval de Barranquilla. According to folklorist Delia Zapata Olivella, it was originally performed in ancient African cabildos of Portobelo and Colón (Panama), and Cartagena de Indias (Colombia), during colonial times. The dance was brought to Barranquilla by the descendants of the members of the cabildos who migrated to La Arenosa in the nineteenth century attracted by its economic growth. The dance was originally performed exclusively by men moving in pairs in a single file (conga), accompanied by men dressed in animal costumes. In the twentieth century, men dressed as women, gay men and eventually women were allowed to join them.

Folklorist Alberto Londoño describes the organization of the Congo dance as follows:

Each dance has an owner, a director and an assistant director; there is also a first head, a second head, a third head and even a fourth head. The owner is the person who founded the dance, inherited it from a relative or purchased its rights. The hierarchies among the different dances depend on the length of their existence and their uninterrupted participation in carnival celebrations. The owner organizes and manages the dance, and names artistic director and the assistant director, who replaces the director in his absence.

The heads of the groups lead the “Negro parties” (people who dance in the congas are called “negros” and the groups in which they are divided during the performance are called “parties”). Congo dances have one or two male parties and a separate female party. An individual’s position in the conga depends on the length of time he or she has been part of the dance, his or her dancing abilities, family relationships and the richness of the costume -each participant is in charge of putting together his or her own costume-. In some cases, the owner of the dance provides the fabric.

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4 Portobelo and Colón were part of Colombia’s territory prior to Panama’s independence, in 1903.

5 Cited in Proclamation of the Carnaval de Barranquilla as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, 68.

6 Alfonso Fontalvo, interview by the author, November, 2005.
but the elaboration and the decoration of the costume is the individual’s responsibility. The director of the dance differentiates himself from the rest of the group by wearing a hat instead of a turban. The hat is an authority symbol and inspires respect.⁷

![Fig. 129. Alfonso Fontalvo, director Danza El Torito Ribeño, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2008.](image)

The music of the *Congo* dance is quite distinctive. Some musicians tap conic-shaped *alegre* drums and scratch the *guacharaca* with a steady rhythm, while others mark

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the cadence of the dancers’ steps with clapping sounds. The *cantador* (narrator) recites allegorical verses which are repeated several times by a responsive choir. The characteristic rhythm of the *Congo* dances follows the traditional sound profile of the “*son de Negro.*” *Congo* dances, such as El Congo Grande, El Torito, El Toro Grande de Rebolo, and El Torito Ribeño, differentiate themselves musically by the beats of the drums.

![Fig. 130. Danza Toro Grande de Rebolo, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2010.](image)

Choreographically, the *Congo* dancers march alternating four steps to the right and four steps to the left, balancing rhythmically. They raise their arms holding their machetes or pikes with a warrior-like attitude. Women alternate dancing to the right and to the left, holding their long skirts. Periodically men and women turn towards the back of the line, then return to the front and continue to go forward. Men disguised as animals
wander around the dancers performing their specific roles. In recent years, children groups have begun to dance in front of adult groups during carnival parades.

Fig. 131. Congo fauna represented by children, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2008.

Congo costumes are very elaborate. Men wear trousers made out of satin or shiny fabric with patches on their knees, ruffles on their ankles and ribbons or laces on the sides. They use long sleeve shirts, vestees, and cloaks decorated with animal symbols and spangles. One of the most distinctive pieces of the Congo attire is the turban, a tall structure decorated with artificial flowers, bows, and other colorful items that carries a long tail or strap adorned with bows and ribbons that fall all the way down to the dancer’s heels. Some Congos embellish their turbans with mirrors, a clear reference to their African ancestors who considered them windows or doors to the other world or decorate the back of the turban with images of sexy women. Women wear frilled blouses and
flounced skirts with crinolines, with the colors of the dance, and decorate their heads with fresh or artificial flowers. They also wear several long necklaces and earrings.

Fig. 132. Congo Rumbero, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2010.

Men wear white paint all over their faces, mark their cheeks with red circles and wear black sunglasses. They carry machetes, inflated pig bladders, dolls, and snakes. Since they are no longer allowed to bring living animals, they use wooden snakes instead.

In recent years, several groups have modified their attires to make them more spectacular for carnival parades. Such is the case of the Congo Reformado, which in 2012 presented shiny outfits and elaborate turbans made out of colorful sequins and lamé.
Fig. 133. Congo Reformado, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2012.
The Garabato dance is one of the most representative traditional dances of the Carnaval de Barranquilla. Its plot represents the fight between life and death, a universal symbol of carnival. The dance is named after the garabato, a wooden hook used by peasants from the Caribbean coast to pull the grass that is cut with a machete. Within the context of carnival, the hook is also associated with the scythe held by the character representing death.

The dance arrived from Colombia’s Caribbean countryside to Barranquilla’s Rebolo neighborhood at an unknown date. It was originally directed by Sebastian Tenura and later by José Terán from whom Emiliano Vengoechea, a member of Barranquilla’s elite, acquired it in 1938. Since then, the oldest and largest Garabato dance has had its
headquarters in Barranquilla’s Country Club and has been performed by its members during carnival’s parades.\(^8\)

In this dance, life is represented by the ringleader who, armed with a machete or a garabato, fights against death, represented by an individual dressed in a skeleton costume. During the parade, dancers march to the rhythm of drums, making figures such as snakes, fans and waves. They also form tunnels by putting their hooks together, moving forward until they stop to represent the battle between life and death, reminiscent of theatrical representations of European carnivals. Life and death face each other in a combat. Every time a dancer loses the battle against death he joins a semi-circle that grows until it is the ringleader’s turn to face death. The final battle is a well-choreographed scene in which the characters representing life and death jump, turn, fall, and roll on the floor, until finally life wins and death is conquered.

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\(^8\) Proclamation of the Carnaval de Barranquilla as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, 83.
The Garabato dance is performed to the traditional rhythms of *pajarito* (little bird), *chandé* and *golpe alegre*, played with three kinds of drums -the *tambora*, the *llamador*, and the *alegre* drum-, maracas and *flauta de millo*. The narrator or *voceador* sings the anecdotes of the dance.

Male participants paint their faces from their eyes down with white paint and red cheeks symbolizing life and death. They wear yellow long-sleeve shirts, ornate vestees, knee-length black trousers decorated with laces, white socks, and black *cotizas* (fabric shoes). They also wear white hats decorated with ribbons and flowers and colorful cloaks.
embellished with embroidered shiny spangles and carnival symbols. They carry white hooks, adorned with matching ribbons. Women wear black low-neck dresses finished with red, yellow, and green ruffles (the colors of Barranquilla’s flag), black shoes, and elaborate flower headpieces.

Fig. 136. Cipote Garabato, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2008.
Fig. 137. Danza de Negros, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2011.

The contribution of the Afro-Colombian community to the Carnaval de Barranquilla is invaluable. Groups from the Caribbean region, particularly from the area of the Canal del Dique and San Basilio de Palenque, are the keepers of many traditional
Afro-Colombian expressions that are performed during carnival parades. The *Danzas de Negros* are cultural expressions of physical strength and sensuality, endurance and agility, movement and trance. They are performed to the frenetic and rapid rhythms of *seresé, puya, buyerengue, golpe de Negro, sextet* and *Mapalé* which follow fast beats and flexible body movements marked by drums.

Women wear short skirts with fringes or ruffles that follow the accelerated motion of their hips and adorn their hair with flowers or turbans. They wear flat shoes or dance barefoot. Men wear pants cut at the knee with bangs or ruffles. They wear *abarcas* or dance barefoot.

In some cases, dancers get very creative with their costumes. They wear elaborate headpieces inspired by African fauna, lions and tigers in particular, and costumes with feline and flame like patterns. Some of the dancers wear beautiful theatrical make-up inspired by African animal patterns.
Among the Afro-Colombian dances, the Mapalé has a special place. It was first brought from Angola by enslaved Africans who arrived in Cartagena de Indias during colonial times. It is named after a local fish that makes very fast movements when taken out of the water. The dance is also named after a percussion instrument, the two-plastered drum used to mark the rhythm of the dance. Within the carnival context, the Mapalé represents the sensual and erotic courtship between a male and a female and the
demonstration of the dancers’ physical abilities which are expressed in a fast and frenetic way.

Fig. 139. Couple dancing Mapalé, “Son Latino,” Casa del Carnaval, 2009.

The music has a binary rhythm that is accompanied by singing and clapping hands. Women move the hips and girdle either very fast or very slow. They raise their arms or keep them to the side of their bodies. Men move their bodies extremely fast, agitating their feet and moving their right leg while anchoring or dragging the left one,
reminiscent of dragging chains during slavery times. Mapalé is danced in a circle. Couples take turns to show their talents in the center as long as the music is played.

Their costumes are very simple. Men are naked from the waist up, they wear pants to their knees and dance barefoot. Women wear bikini tops and short skirts decorated with straw or fringes which follow their frantic movements.

*Son de Negro*

![Image of Son de Negro dancers](fig.140)

Fig. 140. *Son de Negro*, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2008.

The *Son de Negro* dance dates back to the arrival of enslaved Africans in Cartagena de Indias during colonial times. The dances represented at the *Carnaval de Barranquilla* have their roots in cultural expressions that originated in the area of the Canal del Dique including the towns of Santa Lucía and Soplaviento. The contemporary
versions of the Son de Negro represented at the Carnaval de Barranquilla are rather new. Seven of them date from 2002.

Young men of African descent parade to the rhythm of the Son de Negritos, played by an alegre drum, a guacharaca de lata, tablets and clapping hands. The lead voice and the choir recite the following verses, which talk about a tamarind tree branch and the Negros’ search for comfort:

Ae, ea, la rama del tamarindo
Si regreso a la montaña
Corto una vara importante
Ae, ea la rama del tamarindo
Con el tamarindo seco buscando quien me consuele
Ae, ea la rama del tamarindo
Del tamarindo a la rama
La rama del tamarindo.9

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9 Proclamation of the Carnaval de Barranquilla as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, 85.
Fig. 141. *Son de Negro*, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2010.

The choreography of the *Son de Negro* is reminiscent of the way enslaved Africans mocked their masters during colonial times. At first only men performed the dance on the eve of their patron’s festivity. They painted their bodies in black and enhanced their mouths and tongues with red dye. They made exaggerated grimaces and moved as if experiencing seizures or stiffness.
Today the Son de Negro costume is quite distinctive and has become a symbol of the Carnaval de Barranquilla. Young boys and men paint their bodies from head to toe with a mixture of powdered aniline and oil. They leave their torsos naked and wear black pants and sandals, although some prefer to walk barefoot. Some choose to wear necklaces made out of seeds and small calabashes. They all wear the distinctive straw hats decorated with colorful cut paper. Women are allowed to join the dance. They wear colorful dresses and dance in a flirtatious way. The Son de Negro dance has two different movements: The “home dance” or rest, performed by couples in a stationary way, and the “parade,” performed by displacing themselves in a sort of trot, clapping their hands and singing in choir verses with references to their representation.

Fig. 142. Son de Negro, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2012.
The Danza del Caimán belongs to the category of Danzas de Relación. The dancers or the musicians accompanying them tell a story while they perform the choreography. Because of the nature of the dance, it must be performed on a stage or while stopping for a few minutes during carnival parades.

Originally from Ciénaga, Magdalena, this dance has its origins in a myth told for generations by the guardians of oral traditions. The story, which dates from the early nineteenth century, tells that on January 20th, the day of Saint Sebastian according to Christian liturgy, a fisherman and his wife were celebrating their daughter Tomasita’s birthday, when she was suddenly eaten by an enormous caimán. The incident provoked the cancellation of the festivities and the painful lamentation of the father.
A song inspired by the story, which according to Ciénaga’s researcher José Torres Macías was composed by Eulalio Meléndez in 1882, serves as storyline for the dance. In the song, the father asks Tomasita’s sister, Juanita, about her sister’s whereabouts. She tells him the shocking news to which he responds that the *caimán* must be shot and killed.

The dance is a theatrical representation of the story. Men representing fishermen wear white or light shirts tied around their waist, a colored handkerchief on their necks, knickers and straw hats. Women wear white blouses with ample necklines, colorful skirts, necklaces and earrings. Men and women dance barefoot or with *abarcas* (leather

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10 José Torres Macías, quoted in *Proclamation of the Carnaval de Barranquilla as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity*, 99.
sandals). The main character, the *caimán*, is represented by a life size reproduction of the reptile which is carried by a man.

**Danza de los Coyongos**

![Image of Danza de los Coyongos](image)

Fig. 145. Danza de los Coyongos, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2011.
This *Danza de Relación* was inspired by the *Coyongo*, a native wading bird with a long strong beak found in Colombia’s Caribbean region’s rivers and lakes. The dance was founded in Ciénaga Grande, Magdalena, in 1910, by the Sosa, Noguera and Beleño families and has participated in the Carnaval de Barranquilla for over a century. Its current director, Baltasar Sosa Noguera, has led the dance for the past thirty five years.

Fig. 146. Baltasar Sosa Noguera, director of the Danza de los Coyongos, *Rey Momo* 2012, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2012.
The dance involves several native birds including the *Coyongo*, a gray heron, a white heron, a brown heron, a duck, other river birds, a hunter and a fish. The story refers to the birds chasing the fish and the hunter chasing the birds. The birds’ costume is a high pyramidal structure of light wood covered with monochromatic fabric and little wings attached on the sides. At the top of the pyramid are the head and the beak of the bird made out of wood. All dancers wear black shoes and socks. The beak makes a distinctive sound that serves to mark the dance’s pace.\textsuperscript{11}

![Fig. 147. Danza de los Coyongos, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2012.](image)

The dance is performed exclusively by men. Its basic choreography follows a simple move: one step forward and one step backward. As with other *Danzas de Relación*, it stops during the parade to make a short performance in which each bird recites a verse and faces the hunter. Musically, the *Danza de los Coyongos* is

\textsuperscript{11} Mirtha Buelvas Aldana. *Cartilla del Carnaval de Barranquilla [para grupos y disfraces]* (Barranquilla: Ministerio de Cultura-Fundación Carnaval de Barranquilla), 39-40.
accompanied by an accordion, a box and a guacharaca. The birds’ steps are marked by the sounds the dancers make by pulling the wooden beaks with cords while hiding under the fabric structures. The dramatic part of the story occurs when the birds stop to recite their verses and they are scared by the sounds of the hunter’s shots.

*Danza del Paloteo*

Fig. 148. Members of the Danza Paloteo Mixto, Plaza de la Paz, 2008.

The *Danza del Paloteo* is a *Danza de Relación* whose plot recalls the combats between the creoles and the Spaniards during the War of Independence. Each dancer represents a city or a country and carries a distinctive flag. Couples mark the rhythm of the dance by hitting wooden sticks made out of *guayacán* (native tree).

The origins of the dance may be traced to colonial Corpus Christi celebrations. After the Catholic Church prohibited the performance of profane expressions during
religious acts, the dance began to appear in other celebrations. One of the first Paloteo dances, the Paloteo Mixto (Fig. 148), originated in Gaira, Magdalena and participated in Santa Marta’s carnival until the celebration began to decline. The dance spread to the region and eventually arrived in Barranquilla around 1920.\textsuperscript{12}

This warrior dance was originally performed exclusively by men and by no less than six couples, each one representing a different nation. They went from house to house asking for money or rum. Due to Barranquilla’s urban expansion and for security reasons this practice no longer takes place but the dance continues to be performed as part of carnival’s official celebrations.

The contemporary version of the dance begins with the ceremonial act of dressing up in public before the presentation begins. It is executed by no less than eight couples formed by both men and women who fight with wooden sticks and perform acrobatic movements, including carrying their partners on their shoulders.

\textsuperscript{12} Proclamation of the Carnaval de Barranquilla as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, 74-75.
The music that accompanies the Paloteo is a two/four marching movement marked by a redouble drum and a lute. The dancers follow several steps: the “paseo” or “marcha,” in which participants recite the oath to the flag and some verses; the invitation to combat or “square,” marked by one stroke; and the “cerrao” or closing, a slow movement marked by four strokes which culminates the battle.

Men and women wear similar costumes. They both wear long sleeve shirts with vestees decorated with knitted laces, turbans decorated with fake precious stones, embroidered cloaks and slippers. Men wear knickerbockers tied at the knee and long socks while women wear short plaited skirts with shorts of the same color. Both men and women carry flags and wooden sticks.13

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13 Ibid, 75.
Fig. 150. Danza Paloteo Mixto, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2009.

Danza de los Gallinazos o Goleros (Buzzards)

Fig. 151. Danza de los Gallinazos, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2012.
The Danza de los Gallinazos is a *Danza de Relación* inspired by the buzzards found in the Caribbean region. Like many carnival dances it was performed during the celebrations of Corpus Christi during colonial times but was later prohibited by the Catholic Church. Similar to other dances, it was performed in other popular festivals including carnivals.

The buzzards wear long sleeve shirts, baggy trousers fastened at the bottom of their knees, black socks and *cotizas*. Black buzzards use a cape with wings they fold and unfold against their bodies and black masks imitating the features of the birds. A few dancers wear white attire and golden cloaks. The story narrates the tale of a man who goes hunting, gets mad at his donkey and kills him. The buzzards see the dead donkey, surround him, attack the corpse and devour it. The king of the buzzards, identified by his white, black, and red costume and magnificent mask is the first one to attack and eat the prey. The others including the Laura (the king’s female), the baby buzzard and the “sheriff” (grey with white spots) are next followed by the common buzzards dressed in black.
The dance follows two distinctive steps, a slow one indicating the birds are surrounding their prey, and a faster one, which indicates they are devouring it. While some eat the donkey, others recite verses and continue to dance to the rhythm of accordion, caña ‘e millo flute, flageolet and drums.

In 1919, the late Pablo Palmera founded the dance that currently participates in the Carnaval de Barranquilla, in Sabanalarga. Its current director, Apolinar Polo, revived the tradition and maintains it until this day.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, 88.
Fig. 153. *Gallinazos*, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2012.
Danza El Imperio de las Aves

Fig. 154. Danza El Imperio de las Aves, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2009.

The Danza de Relación El Imperio de las Aves originated in Barranquilla’s Barrio Rebolo in 1930. It was founded by Pedro Barreto and Pedro Berdugo, father of the current director Carmen Berdugo. The men worked at the marketplace and got inspired by the birds that came in search of food and were scared by the people who threw rocks at them.

The Imperio de las Aves narrates the story of a group of birds of different species and colors that fly to a garden to eat apples and flowers but are scared away by a hunter and his dog. The dance is accompanied by music played by an accordion and a guacharaca. The birds, the hunter and the dog take turns to recite their verses.\(^\text{15}\)

The Danza de los Diablos belongs to the category of Danzas Especiales, traditional regional dances that do not have a specific argument like the Danzas de Relación. They have roots in Spaniard celebrations and were brought to America during colonial times.

The Danza de los Diablos first appeared in the popular and religious celebrations of Corpus Christi of the main colonial Spanish towns of the territories that today constitute the departamentos of Bolivar, Magdalena and Cesar. The Catholic Church allowed the celebration of popular traditions with indigenous and African traits as a strategy to convert local people to Christianity. Both indigenous peoples and African slaves believed in evil spirits which were easily associated with the devils of European Christian
iconography. Through syncretism, they related to the concepts of good and evil associated with the Holy God and the devils of the Catholic liturgy.¹⁶

Danzas de Diablos resulted from the syncretism that occurred among indigenous, African and Spaniard peoples during Conquest and Colonial times. They were inspired by the story of a group of masked devils who went to church carrying on their backs sheepskins decorated with mirrors and jewels that reflected the sun rays and pretended to scare the Holy Ghost with their dance and the noise of their spurs and rattles; black men with machetes came to defend the Holy Spirit forcing the devils to retreat in procession, walking backwards; at the end of the story, people rejoiced upon the devils’ departure and celebrated the popular festivities.

By 1890, during the Republican era, the Catholic Church prohibited the performance of devil dances during Corpus Christi celebrations so they began to appear in other festivities including carnival celebrations. The devil dances that first appeared in the Carnaval de Barranquilla came from villages located along the banks of the Magdalena River, particularly from the area surrounding the colonial town of Mompox.

Today, the Danza de Diablos Arlequines, from Sabanalarga, Atlántico, represents this cultural expression at the Carnaval de Barranquilla. Founded by its director Apolinar Polo Morales over forty years ago it gathers over twenty men of at least 15 years old, the minimum age required to join the dance.¹⁷

¹⁶ Proclamation of the Carnaval de Barranquilla as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, 102.

The characters of the Diablos Arlequines are reminiscent of the devils portrayed in Spanish Medieval carnival celebrations and the Italian Commedia dell’ Arte. They are a combination of devils, buffoons and *saltimbancos*. Their costumes are inspired by medieval jester costumes made with bright colored satin fabric. Their wear hoods on their heads, long-sleeve shirts with tips coming out of their waist and finished with jingle bells, knickerbockers (each leg with a different color) finished with tips and jingle bells, long socks and shoes with iron spurs tied to their ankles.
Fig. 156. Danza Diablos Arlequines de Sabanalarga, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2012.

The most important element of the costume is the mask, which is not worn on the face but on top of the head in the manner that masks were used by some African cultures. It consists of a devil face carved and painted in red over a square wooden piece. It is decorated with mirrors, which not only are reminiscent of ones used by the devils of the
original legend, but are also used by the dancers to apply their make-up prior to beginning their performance. Like many characters of the cultural manifestations of the Carnaval de Barranquilla, their faces are painted in white and marked with small red circles on the cheeks as a symbol of the Spanish influence in local traditions.

Fig. 157. Member of the Danza Diablos Arlequines de Sabanalarga, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2006.

During their performances, the devils march to the rhythm of melodic instruments such as the accordion or the lute and the double beats of the drums or the caja (percussion instrument). They go back and forth leaning forward, making noise with bells, castanets and spurs. As their concentration rises they stop to make pirouettes around small bottles placed on the floor. They cross their legs and arms as they jump over the bottles without knocking them down. These pirouettes are done following the puya
rhythm in preparation for the grand *finale*, when one, two or three devils take turns to blow impressive flames from their mouths.

In order to blow these flames, the dancers fill their mouths with liquid gas, which they hold for approximately three minutes before blowing it over a lit match. Each devil consumes one to two liters of gas during the parade. The secret for not getting intoxicated is to take a glass of milk right after every blow. One the devils finish blowing fire, the ritual ends with a menacing verse and the devils’ cynical laughter.18

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18 Ibid, 103.
The *Danza de las Farotas* originated in the town of Talaigua near Mompox, Bolívar, where the Faroto and Chimila indigenous groups lived prior to the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors. The dance was inspired by oral testimonies that tell the story of how, tired of the harassment and abuse suffered by their women in the hands of the Spaniards colonizers, indigenous men disguised themselves as women and ambushed them at night.

The dance follows specific choreographic movements marked by different rhythms of indigenous roots. According to Professor Rafael Soto Mazenet, the dance begins with “the ‘washing son,’ an initial slow rhythm in honor of the God Chiqua whose
force they pray to do the ‘washing.’”19 Slowly the dancers’ movements become more active and joyous as they are marked by variations of traditional puyas or guachernas, also known as perilleo. Dancers are accompanied by six musicians playing the caña ‘e millo or millo flute, maracas, traditional drums and a tambora (bass drum).

Although there are several groups, the Farotas de Talaigua, formerly directed by the late Etelvina Dávila, is the best known for its long tradition of participating in the Carnaval de Barranquilla.20 All the members of the dance are men with the exception of its current director, Etelvina Dávila’s daughter, Mónica Ospino Dávila. Although the Farotas wear feminine dresses, colorful umbrellas, flower-decorated hats, earrings, necklaces and make-up, their gestures and steps are very masculine. In addition to the thirteen dancers, one of them a child, they are accompanied by the director and a flag porter or dance watcher in all their performances.

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20 Proclamation of the Carnaval de Barranquilla as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, 105.
Fig. 160. Etelvina Dávila, director of the Farotas de Talaigua (deceased), Gran Parada de Tradición, 2009.
The dance is performed to the rhythm of the *Son de Farotas* and follows specific movements, including “the salutation,” “the X crossing,” “the front crossing,” the “*perrillero* with open umbrellas” and the “*perrillero* with closed umbrellas.” All the steps require them to dance tilting forward with their heads up in a defiant manner.

The *Farotas*’ costumes include tight long-sleeved t-shirts known as *amansa locos* used to protect their bodies from the sun while participating in farming activities, brightly decorated vestees, long wide skirts with petticoats and aprons, and *abarcas tres-puntá* (three knotted sandals), typically used by the countrymen of the region. They also use straw hats folded in the front and decorated with colorful artificial flowers, long earrings and bright red lipstick, imitating seductive women. The umbrella is used as a feminine accessory and also as a choreographic element during the performance.
Fig. 162. Young member of the Danza Farotas de Talaigua, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2009.
Danzas de Indios

Fig. 163. Danza Indios Farotos Ribereños, Festival de Danzas de Relación y Danzas Especiales, Plaza de la Paz, 2011.

The Danzas the Indios belong to the category of Danzas Especiales. They are inspired by original rituals performed by indigenous peoples who inhabited the banks of the Magdalena River prior to the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors. The dances are named after the “figures” they represent with their choreographies or the tribes from which they originally came. There are currently three distinct groups: the Indios Farotos, the Indios de Trenza, and the Chimilas. Each one has a distinctive choreography and costume but they all dance to similar rhythms.

The dance of the Chimilas represents the story of an indigenous princess, the Pola, who is condemned to death for rebelling against her Cacique. The characters of the dance are the Cacique (indigenous chief), the Cacica (female indigenous chief), the male Captain, the female Captain, the Pola, and the male and female “Indians.” The story is
told in twelve different parts including, among others, the fleeing, the ring crossing and the braid weaving. The dance ends with the Pola’s death.21

Women wear short sleeveless and collarless blouses and short skirts. Men wear knickers and a vest or a shirt. Both wear little caps decorated with feathers, flowers and mirrors, and slippers. The Cacique and the Cacica wear similar outfits, but more decorated, and they carry bows. In all Danzas de Indios the music is performed by tambourines and two different gaitas, macho (male) and hembra (female). Dancers distinguish themselves by their costumes, their choreographies and their flags.

Fig. 164. Danza Indios Farotos Ribereños, Festival de Danzas de Relación y Danzas Especiales, Plaza de la Paz, 2011.

At the end of their choreography, the Indios Farotos weave ribbons on a pole following the rhythm of the dancers’ steps. The “braid” is carefully synchronized and

21 Ibid, 95.
requires discipline and coordination. Women wear sleeveless and collarless blouses and short skirts and men wear knickers and vests or shirts. The Farotos distinguish themselves by wearing cloaks decorated with ribbons. Some of them use loincloth skirts and body painting.

![Image of a cultural group](image)

Fig. 165. Grupo folclórico y cultural Kosta Azul, Danza Indios Manzos, Playas Blancas, Guamal, Magdalena. Gran Parada de Tradición, 2007.

The *Indios de Trenza* also braid ribbons on a pole held by one of the members of the dance while the rest of the dancers go around clockwise and counterclockwise, covering it with colorful ribbons and uncovering it, following two distinctive rhythms.

The *Indios de Trenza* also dance as couples in a semicircle and perform a choreography involving bows. Each indigenous dance has a special step for marching forward with specific movements that, according to oral traditions, correspond to rituals.
performed by their ancestors.\textsuperscript{22} Their costumes are similar to the ones used by other indigenous dancers except for the decorations they make to the front of their shirts and the feather ornaments they wear on their heads.

Fig. 166. Danza Indios Caribanos, Festival de Danzas de Relación y Danzas Especiales, Plaza de la Paz, 2011.

Danza de Micos y Micas

There are many carnival dances inspired by local fauna including the Danza del Tigre (Tiger Dance), the Danza del Gusano (Worm Dance) and the Danza de la Serpiente (Snake Dance). Originally from Barranquilla’s surrounding rural areas, the Danza de Micos y Micas (Male and Female Monkeys Dance) is one of the few that has survived the passing of time.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, 96.
The dance does not have a specific choreography. Each dancer performs freely, imitating the movements made by the primates that inspire their characters, to the rhythm of a caja vallenata (drum) and a guacharaca. Both boys and girls disguise themselves with brown tight leotards and wooden hand-made masks.

Fig. 167. Danza de Micos y Micas, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2012.
The Danza de Micos y Micas dates from the nineteenth century and has participated in the Carnaval de Barranquilla for over seventy years. Originally from Soledad, Atlántico, the dance has been kept alive by the Pérez Barranco family and his current director and owner Vicente Pérez Barranco.

Fig. 168. Vicente Pérez Barranco, director of the Danza Micos y Micas, Plaza de la Paz, 2008.
Danza del Gusano

Fig. 169. Danza del Gusano, Festival de Danzas de Relación y Danzas Especiales, Plaza de la Paz, 2011.

This Danza Especial was founded by folklorist and cultural researcher Carmen Meléndez in Barranquilla, in 1989. Inspired by the Danza del Gusano presented by the group La Llorona Loca, from Tamalameque, Cesar, Meléndez decided to choreograph one for the Carnaval de Barranquilla. In her version of the dance, the dancers are arranged in a row and shape the rhythmic body of the worm by making a line from tall to short. The head is the tallest and the tail is the smallest.

The movement imitates those of the tobacco leaves’ worm, also called Centipede, in the Departamento del Magdalena. Dancers move to the rhythm of puya holding each other by the waist and rhythmically pulling to the sides, right foot and right arm first, then left foot and left arm. The movements are generally done in a semicircle, mimicking the body of the worm. The movements of all dancers must be coordinated.
The costume consists of baggy green pants adorned with green and yellow strings and a long sleeve shirt with hanging strings. The head is covered with a green hood attached to the shirt. The first in line, the head of the worm, wears a mask with antennae.  

**COMPARSAS**

**Marimondas**

![Fig. 170. Marimondas del Barrio Abajo, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2007.](image)

*Comparsas* are traditional carnival groups identified by their costumes. They participate in carnival parades with special choreographies danced to popular rhythms. The *Marimondas* are some of the most popular *comparsas* of the Carnaval de Barranquilla. The *Marimonda* was originally created by a poor man, a “resentido” and

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“mamador de gallo,” who had no money to purchase a costume during carnival times. He made a mask out of a cloth sack and adorned it with big ears, a long phallic-looking nose and openings for the mouth and the eyes. He covered his entire body so he would not be recognized. He wore a pair of old pants and an old jacket inside out and walked around making a disturbing sound with a whistle known as pea-pea. He also wore a long necktie to ridicule government officials.

The Marimonda made fun of people, particularly members of the ruling class. He was vulgar, aggressive and kept people away by poking them with a stick. In many occasions the individual wearing the costume ended in jail for his abusive advances. By the 1970s the costume had disappeared.

In 1983, César “Paragüita” Morales who remembered the costume from his youth decided to revive it. With a couple of friends he created the Marimondas del Barrio Abajo. Paragüita’s idea was not only to revive the costume but also to transform it. He used colorful fabrics to beautify it and changed the vulgar attitude of the original Marimonda for a friendlier one. In 2012, the Marimondas del Barrio Abajo was the largest carnival group with more than six hundred participants.24

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In 2000, former members of the Marimondas del Barrio de Abajo created a new group with headquarters at the Barrio Abajo (Paragüita now lives in the Montecristo neighborhood). Led by José Ignacio “El Pavo” Cassiani, the Rebelión de las Auténticas Marimondas del Barrio Abajo brought back the original costume made out of old pants and old jackets and added a new touch by sewing colored patches to them. The group also brought back the pea-pea whistle and other vulgar jokes.
Fig. 172. Rebelión de las Auténticas Marimondas del Barrio Abajo, Gran Parada de Fantasía, 2011.

Monocucos

Fig. 173. Monocucos del Barrio Las Nieves, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2010.
According to Edgar Rey Sinning the *capuchón* appeared many years ago in the villages where carnival was celebrated, including El Banco, Ciénaga and Rioacha. Although it is not possible to know when the first *capuchón* arrived in Barranquilla, it is accurate to say the costume was very popular in carnival festivities in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The *capuchones* also known as *Monocucos* were the most popular, cheap and festive costumes in the Carnival de Barranquilla.

According to Alfredo De la Espriella, the name “*Monocuco*” comes from a monkeys’ costume inspired by the Commedia dell' Arte that for a while was part of Barranquilla’s vernacular tradition. When it disappeared it was replaced by the harlequinesque *capuchón*. De la Espriella claims that the *capuchón* became popular when members of the elite decided to participate in carnival’s popular celebrations. Covered from head to toe, wearing a mask, gloves and a stick to avoid transgressors wanting to discover their identity, individuals were able to enjoy the celebration anonymously.

The costume began to disappear in the second half of the twentieth century. In 1995, Roberto Guzmán decided not to continue dancing in the Gallo Giro, the *cumbiamba* he directed, and to create the *comparsa* Los Monocucos del Barrio Las Nieves, which participated for the first time in the Carnaval de Barranquilla in 1996.25 Men and women dress with the same costume made out of a bright colored gown, a hood, a mask and a veil that covers the whole face. They carry a stick to keep away people who may want to discover their identities.

Cabezones and Gigantonas

Fig. 174. Cabezones, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2008.

The first Cabezones were brought from Germany by the former owner of Café Almendra Tropical, Celio Villalba. They participated for the first time in the Carnaval de Barranquilla in 1937. These big-headed dwarves that ridicule human beings are grotesque figures that constitute a transgression to the classical model of beauty from a European perspective. They were brought to Barranquilla as an innovative costume to be displayed in carnival parades where they became a traditional comparsa.

The gigantonas or muñecotas are the antithesis of the cabezones. They are gigantic deformed ugly dolls whose heads are made with the same technique as the cabezones’. They are known for their colossal size and their exaggerated hip movements, which in carnival theory are transgressive elements that contrast with the classical norm.
Fig. 175. Gigantona, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2012.
According to the director of the *comparsa*, Isabel Muñoz, the Negritas Puloy, were inspired by the logo of a popular detergent made in Venezuela that featured a black woman with an Afro and a voluminous red dress with white polka dots. The original
comparsa was formed by adult women, including many of Muñoz’s relatives and neighbors from the Montecristo and Barrio Abajo neighborhoods. They were later joined by young girls from Las Palmas and La Magdalena.

Founded in 1970, the group has been participating in the Carnaval de Barranquilla for over forty years. The girls wear black Afro wigs and the distinguishable red with white polka dots mini dresses. They dance to the rhythm of a papayera. The requirements to participate in the comparsa are to be a good dancer and to have a cheerful attitude.

COSTUMES

Despite the fact that people do not wear costumes like they used to, the tradition of disguising during carnival times is not lost among the barranquilleros. Traditional costumes from the Carnaval de Barranquilla reappear year after year in parades and other official events. According to Edgardo Aguirre Guzmán, the act of disguising is part of the barranquillero’s identity. “He likes to paint his face, wear a mask, he is funny, talented, has imagination and mischief, besides that, he likes to bother, mama gallo, he is easy going, temperamental and more legal than hell, condition-no-qua non to dress up.”26

Disguising allows people to escape reality, to break rules and to attain freedom. Disguising and masking not only hide the individual’s identity but also go beyond the expressions of innocence and festive abandon by establishing dynamic relationships between observers and masked subjects. Gerard Aching suggests analyzing these

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relations in an effort to comprehend how masks and masked activities in contemporary Caribbean mediate social relations within and outside carnival.27

Because during carnival times everything is allowed and barranquilleros like to push the limits, they have the ideal disposition to not only wear the costume, but also to give it a life of its own. Traditional costumes come with specific physical attributes and are generally made out of found materials due to the fact that most people do not have the means to pay for expensive ones. Each individual in costume has “attitude” or a “specific personality,” generally a funny one or a disrespectful one.

Some of the traditional costumes of the Carnaval de Barranquilla include María Moñitos, El Descabezado, El Mohicano Dorado, La Loca, El Siemprevivo and Cantiflas, among many others.

27 Aching, 2.
Emil Castellanos, a humble resident from Las Nieves neighborhood, created the costume that became known as María Moñitos. The story tells that one day he found out his wig had been stolen. Since he was poor and could not afford a new one, he tied his hair with many braids (moñitos), put on his wife’s dress and high-heeled shoes and went out to the street to celebrate carnival.
Castellanos approached couples and accused men of being unfaithful, of cheating with other women, kissing them and driving them insane. He would only leave them alone when they gave him some money. Soon he became a symbol of the Carnaval de Barranquilla. He died young but the character he created continues to be immortalized by his son and hundreds of *carnavaleros* who dress like María Moñitos during the carnival season.

Another traditional costume is El Descabezado. It is inspired by a historical period characterized by violence and it has been present at the Carnaval de Barranquilla since 1954. Its creator, Ismael Guillermo Escorcia Medina, was inspired by his childhood memories and particularly by the assassination of political leader Jorge Eliecer Gaitán. This historical event marked the beginning of the period known as La Violencia that ran from 1946 to 1957. During those years, Escorcia Medina frequently saw corpses floating down the Magdalena River, some headless, others dismembered. He decided to create something that could be a continual testimony of that time and he came up with the idea of creating a costume featuring a headless man he called El Descabezado.

Since it first appeared in 1954, the costume has retained the same form varying only with regards to the materials used for its construction. It is made out of a large sized beheaded body, fully dressed, with a bleeding neck, carrying its head in one hand and a machete in the other. In recent years, Escorcia Medina has developed new characters inspired by political figures and popular culture characters.

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28 Aguirre Guzmán, 6.
Fig. 178. El Descabezado (Fidel Castro), Gran Parada de Tradición, 2011.
The Mohicano Dorado was inspired by the pre-Columbian legend of El Dorado. Represented by Carlos Cervantes, the costume is an allegory to Colombia’s indigenous population. El Dorado’s golden body was also the inspiration for the costume worn by the Carnival Queen during the Gran Parada de Tradición, in 2011.
Fig. 180. La Loca Peligrosa de Soledad, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2010.

Nieve Quintana Gómez represents “the dangerous crazy woman from the Soledad neighborhood.” Her character is grotesque and her attitude scary. She represents a good example of some of the limits people are able to push during carnival times.
Just like carnival never dies, El Siemprevivo (“alive forever”) is eternal. That is the concept behind the costume created by Carlos Restrepo in 1994. Despite the fact that he is cut by a saw and stabbed by a machete, a screwdriver and a pick, he survives every year’s celebration and comes back year after year with his bloody costume. The scene is
somehow the reflection of Colombia’s political and social realities which are violent and bloody.

Fig. 182. “Cantinflas,” Carlos Julio Castro de la Hoz, Gran Parada de Tradición, 2010.
Many costumes from the Carnaval de Barranquilla ridicule or mimic people. Look-alikes of politicians, singers, actors and sports people are extremely popular. For over fifteen years, Enrique Morales and Carlos Julio Castro de la Hoz have taken advantage of their physical appearance to impersonate famous Mexican comedian Cantinflas during carnival events. Their faces are almost identical and they mimic him with the same funny speech that made the original character so successful. They not only look like Mario Moreno, Cantinflas’ real name, but they act as if they were the real Cantinflas, an icon of Latin American popular culture.

Fig. 183. “Mono Jojoy,” Edgar Estrada; “Hugo Chávez,” Juan Ruiz; “Piedad Córdoba,” Leydis Reales de Estrada; “Raúl Reyes,” Juan Jiménez Caballero; “Oscar de León,” William de la Hoz; Gran Parada de Tradición, 2008.

Other lookalikes include national and international political figures, including members of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), presidents,
government officials and artists such as the ones depicted in the picture above. United States’ politicians are also represented including George W. Bush and Barak Obama.

Fig. 184. “George Bush,” Gran Parada de Tradición, 2006.

George Bush’s look-alike paraded in 2006 accompanied by Uncle Sam. The latter pointed his finger, recalling the famous poster that reads “I want you” printed by the United States Department of Defense.
The current President of the United States, Barak Obama, and his family were featured in a mini float in the 2009 Gran Parada de Tradición advertising the float’s sponsor, a local brand of milk produced by the Cooperativa Industrial Lechera de Colombia (Ciledco).
The last event of the carnival season proves to be the most creative one when it comes to individual costumes. Men and women improvise to dress-up as Joselitos (carnival’s impersonator, in the photograph above disguised as a Marimonda), widows (cross-dressing is customary), priests and nuns, doctors and nurses, or any other character that participates in carnival’s funeral. They cry, they scream, they laugh with total

Fig. 186. Joselito’s Burial, Barrio Abajo, 2008.
freedom, without any limitations. There is sadness and drama due to the end of the carnival season, but there is also joy from knowing carnival will be celebrated again the following year.

Fig. 187. Joselito’s Burial, Barrio Abajo, 2012. Photo courtesy of Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A.