

“Champeta music: Between regional popularity and national rejection, Colombia 1970-2000”

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Abstract

Champeta is the music from the Colombian Caribbean coast and extremely popular in an Afro-descendant community of any age, increasingly fancied by non-black people as well. Despite being highly celebrated on the coast, in the capital Bogotá and other big cities of the country’s interior, *champeta* is still marginalized and not recognized as a music suitable for the rest of Colombian society. This article reviews the history of champeta music from the late 1960s to the late 1990s, with a particular focus on the diverging developments in Cartagena and Barranquilla, respectively. It analyzes factors that may explain the local and regional popularity as well as the national rejection of *champeta*, and concludes that the elements which made *champeta* regionally successful are precisely those elements which hindered its acceptance on a national level, namely, the focus on blackness and the African Diaspora, distinct class-based tastes, a loud claim to space by the lower classes, and the high regional stratification of the Colombian society.

Keywords: Colombia – Champeta – African Diaspora – Caribbean – music – class – race

Introduction

In 2002, Manuel Reyes, producer of champeta music, received a short letter from the President of Colombia in which he congratulated Reyes for the success of the band Champeta All Stars. The President wrote: “I encourage you to keep on making the best of and reconstructing our Afro-Colombian culture and achieving success on a national and international level” (Uribe 2002). This may sound like a friendly appreciation of cultural work but it was a long and rocky way to arrive at this point. The musical genre champeta, born on the Colombian Caribbean coast, was not always the object of praise and goodwill. In fact, it suffered mistrust, refusal and discrimination in its existence of about thirty-five years.

Since the late 1960s, African and Afro-Caribbean music was imported to the coastal cities of Barranquilla and Cartagena de Indias. In the beginning, it was played in its original form at communal *fiestas* in the poorer neighborhoods of both cities. From the early 1980s on, local musicians and producers moved over from only consuming it to making their own covers of it and producing fusions of African and coastal Colombian music. Both the African tunes and the covers were known as champeta but also had a variety of other names, like *música africana*, *champeta africana*, or *terapia*. For simplification, this essay refers to the imported music as *música africana* and to the first generation of covers and local fusions as cover versions. A couple of years later, *champeta criolla* emerged as a mix of *música africana* with Afro-Colombian rhythms mainly from the former maroon village Palenque and was converted into its own unique music.¹ It features the drum set, keyboard, electric guitar, bass, congas, and a synthesizer. Ever since the 1980s, champeta has become *the* music from the Colombian Caribbean coast and has proven to be extremely popular amongst the African-descendant community of every age, increasingly fancied by non-black people, as well. Despite being highly celebrated on the coast, in the biggest cities of the interior champeta is still marginalized and not recognized as a music suitable for the entire Colombian society.

One of the first scholars to write about champeta was Deborah Pacini (1993, 1996) who did anthropological field work in Cartagena throughout the 1990s. Pacini has analyzed in detail the emergence of champeta music in the context of the African Diaspora and has stated that it encouraged Afro-descendants from the Caribbean coast “to acknowledge with pride that their cultural identity was Caribbean” (112). The cultural orientation towards something else than the Colombian nation-state has also been taken up by successive contributions. Of those works concerned with the developments prior to 2000, Claudia Mosquera and Marion Provansal (2000) have focused on cultural identification and the emotional meaning of champeta, followed by Elisabeth Cunin (2003, 2006-2007) and Nicolás Ramón Contreras (2003). More recently, Luis Gerardo Martínez (2011) and Ligia Aldana (2013) have emphasized the music’s political potential.

If one contrasts champeta to other Colombian musical expressions it becomes apparent that its initial phase resembled the development of other regional music styles, foremost vallenato and cumbia, which were first consumed by lower-class, ethnically marginalized groups before being integrated into dominant society and turned into national music. In this context, Gerhard Kubik (1979, 9) has noticed that some music styles that are performed by the lower classes stay within these classes and some climb up the societal ladder. Theodor Adorno (2001, 108, 2002, 391) concedes culture a functional relationship within society and sees music as a dimension of wider social processes. This is particularly true for a context like the one Colombia displays because music constitutes an important and always very visible (audible) part of daily life, and hence, has the potential to act as a mirror of Colombian society. In this spirit, the record label Analog Africa (2012, 14) has stated that “[t]he story of Colombia’s African revival, and its accompanying soundtrack, form[s] but one prism through which the portrait of race and class divisions can be understood.”

This article reviews the history of champeta on the Colombian Caribbean coast (commonly called *La Costa*) from the late 1960s to the late 1990s. It accounts for the emergence of *champeta criolla* out of *música africana* and emphasizes the distinct developments in Barranquilla and Cartagena presenting the voices of several of its protagonists. It engages with the question of why champeta was not well received at a national level despite its immense local popularity. The conceptual considerations on lower-class culture, race relations in Colombian society, the African Diaspora, and the changing socio-political context provide a frame for this analysis. The findings will show that these elements made champeta regionally popular on *La Costa* whilst being precisely the same elements which hindered its acceptance on a national level. Champeta music features many unique characteristics that are not to be found in the history of other music styles; the public opinion on champeta ranges from the highest praise to the deepest disdain and the rhetoric goes far beyond the musical sphere. Within the development of champeta, there were several phases in coalescing of the new evolutions, and although there is a chronology, it is not a linear story, something that the different accounts of Cartagena, Barranquilla and the role of Palenque show.²

***Música africana* and the invisibility of Afro-descendants**

Samy Ben Redjeb, founder of the record label Analog Africa, traveled from Germany to Colombia in 2007 in search for records. He claims that the reason for his trip were pictures of Colombian music stores, whose walls were completely covered in African record sleeves, and internet blogs dealing with vintage African music still popular in the Colombian cities Barranquilla and Cartagena (Analog Africa 2012, 1).³ What he found on site, African music as well as a mixture of Colombian music influenced by African grooves, was the music that had been listened to by Afro-descendants in Barranquilla since the 1970s. “African music”, in

this context, is a heterogeneous ensemble of music from all over the African continent. However, the music which was most loved and most abundant on *La Costa* was soukous from Congo, highlife from Nigeria and, to a lesser extent, jùjú from Nigeria and mbaqanga from South Africa from the 1960s and especially 1970s (Pacini 1993, 101; Mosquera and Provansal 2000). Prior to the 1970s, African music was not yet consumed much although Miriam Makeba and a few others were listened to in the 1960s in Barranquilla (Viveros 2010). African artists consumed in the 1970s on *La Costa* were, amongst many others, Fela Kuti and Prince Nico Mbarga from Nigeria; The Stukas, Diblo Dibala, and Lokassa Yambongo from Congo; and Ernesto Djédjé from Ivory Coast (Analog Africa 2012, 10-12).

The historical coverage of this early stage of champeta in Cartagena has been relatively well documented, as well as the medium through which this music has been made sound ever since, the so-called *picó*.⁴ Deborah Pacini (1993, 87-88) has claimed that the first versions of these immense craft sound-systems were nothing more than a console with small speakers; over time they became the symbol of champeta music *per excellence*. It is now widely known that the name derived from a medium-sized knife, called *champa* or *champeta*, which was carried by lower-class laborers who worked at the Bazarro market and other manual labor locations in Cartagena. Soon, the listeners of this music began to be depreciatively called *champetíos* and their music *champeta* (Pacini 1993, 102, 1996, 450; Estrada 2015). Champeta singer Louis Towers (2015) underlines the extremely offensive connotation since champeta was associated with violence, sex and even drugs well until the middle of the 1980s: “Earlier, when you would call me *champetío*, I could tell you, do me a favor and respect me. Don’t call me *champetío*.”

Abelardo Carbonó, who came to be the most famous cover artist of *música africana* in Barranquilla, confirms the working-class, and even rural,⁵ background of the champeta listeners and the origin of the term: “Farmers and peasants would go to the ‘verbenas’ (barrio

street parties) after work to enjoy a drink and some music. [...] Those guys use[d] to stick their ‘Champeta’, also known as a machete, into their pants and dance along the music. That’s how our style of play became known as ‘Champeta’” (Analog Africa 2012). This quote reveals that the early stages and the naming of this music as champeta were not—as often suggested—restricted to the Cartagenian context but rather that it was a process taking place simultaneously in Cartagena and Barranquilla. Yet, Nigerian highlife was more fancied in Cartagena and Congolese soukous more wanted in Barranquilla, as champeta producer Humberto Castillo (2015), who has spent more than 40 years in the business, explains. In the two cities there was no homogeneous music scene to be found, a fact which, with regard to their musical competition, points towards a very interesting and explosive rivalry. In fact, the trial for musical strength between Cartagena and Barranquilla has always existed. Although the two cities lay only 90 kilometers distance from each other, not all the music that was liked by *cartageneros* (inhabitants of Cartagena) was also liked by *barranquilleros* (inhabitants of Barranquilla), and *vice versa*. But the love for *música africana* was shared (Estrada 2015). Both cities have been nursing themselves from the creativity of the respective other, and feelings of competition contributed to the musical quality that emerged out of this.

The musical imports from the late 1960s and 1970s appealed to the African-descendant lower classes on the Caribbean coast. In fact, the middle and upper classes had no idea that this kind of music was consumed in the country.⁶ This is related to the high stratification of Colombian society along class, race, and regionalism. In Colombia there are certain features which make the approach to and the discussions on national identity far more complex than in other societies, also due to the fact that there are several important characteristics which partly contradict each other. There is, on the one hand, a supposed homogeneity which results out of the cultural and physical merging over the last 500 years (since the contact of indigenous people with the first European colonists and enslaved

Africans); on the other hand, there is great emphasis on regionalism expressed by claims to the extreme geographic diversity. Besides, Colombian society historically consists of three ethnic groupings—indigenous people, people of African descent, and people of European descent⁷—, yet the Colombian nation is regarded as *mestizo*. Ideologically, the process of *mestizaje* equals the erasing of black, and to a lesser extent indigenous people, from the representations of the nation on which ideas of nationhood in Colombia rest upon and puts a constant emphasis on artificial ethnic homogeneity. One could also say that the hegemonic project of *mestizaje* generally preserved racial hierarchies in favor of “whiteness” (Wade 2000, 3-5; Chaves and Zambrano 2005, 7).

The ethnic division of the population is further aggravated by geographical and political factors. The Colombian nation is very much centered on its capital Bogotá and a few other places in the interior; more remote regions like the Pacific and the Caribbean coasts (where a great many of African-descendants live) have been economically and politically neglected.⁸ The idea of *mestizos* being the true Colombian citizens has systematically downplayed the culture and historical contributions of African descendants. Indigenous people, by contrast, have always been recognized as contributing to the social construction of *mestizaje*. Elisabeth Cunin has stated that both black and indigenous people have suffered and still suffer from racism in Colombia but the indigenous people at least had a clear legal status—an admittedly exotic but socially accepted one. A consequence of this visibility of the indigenous ethnic group was the further invisibility of people of African descent (2003, 31-32). In this context, it was not surprising that mainstream society did not take notice of the cultural developments that were taking place among *Afro-costeños* (people from *La Costa*). Amplified by their cultural isolation, the arrival of African music furnished the latter with a common denominator to link them as a cultural group, and offered a reference point to connect to an (imagined) past in Africa.

Musically, however, *La Costa* had long been geared towards the Caribbean. As Adolfo González (1989, 41) has noted, the influence of Cuban music was increasingly noticeable since the 1920s and eventually replaced for good any Andean, European, or North American rhythms.⁹ What changed with champeta was that *costeños* not only took the Hispanic Caribbean as a reference of identification but also the plurilingual Gran Caribe which was more inclusive to the African heritage (Contreras 2003, 36). Very relevant to note is that usage of the term *música africana* to speak of the music being played at the *picós* in the 1970s does not refer to music from Africa only. Deborah Pacini (1996, 432) observed that it also included black Caribbean music like zouk from Martinique and Guadeloupe, soca from Trinidad, and reggae and dancehall from Jamaica. Additionally, music from the US, Suriname, Panama, Venezuela, and Curaçao could also be labelled *música africana* although “not all of it was from Africa although most of it was African” (Benítez 2015). *Música africana* in Barranquilla and Cartagena was everything that sounded to the people like music from Africa. Since Europe, and especially Paris,¹⁰ functioned as a transfer site for as well as a place of production of African music, more and more records were brought or sent to Colombia from there as well (Pacini 1993, 74; Silva 2015). At first, sailors and other private persons sent records to Colombia from their rather informal journeys; later on, individuals got professionally hired by record labels and *picoteros* (*picó* owners) in order to travel abroad and look for the tunes that were on demand on *La Costa*.

Once the records arrived in Barranquilla or Cartagena, their origins were obscured and the songs renamed. The renaming of African songs was common practice by then. Since the music which was brought from Africa, Europe and the Caribbean was not spread on a radio level but through the *picós*,¹¹ the DJs of the *picós* had the highest interest in securing exclusivity. In order to do this, the *picó* owners would rip the cover off the record and throw away the sleeve so that nobody else knew the origin of the record and competitors could not

obtain the same one (Estrada 2015). The record was then renamed—baptized—with a Colombian name and turned into an *exclusivo*. For instance, the song *Sweet Mother* by highlife musician Prince Nico Mbarga was renamed into *El pijama de mi abuelo* (“My grandfather’s pyjama”) and Fela Kuti’s *Shakara* turned into *Shakalao* (Analog Africa 2012, 11). Depending on the success of the record, i.e. how the *picó* community celebrated it, the *picotero* would keep the monopoly for up to half a year (Cunin 2006-2007; Castillo 2015) before commercializing it, which means pressing it on vinyl to sell it. Here is when the record labels came into play. They would release records with compilations of the most successful songs after the *picós* had made them popular. Discos Tropical, Discos Fuentes, Kuki Records and Felito Records played an important role in this regard (Analog Africa 2012, 13; Torres 2015; Butrón 2015). Exclusivity was, after all, the highest asset in the competition amongst the different *picós*. There was competition between the *picós* of Cartagena and Barranquilla which, by doing this, maintained the historical musical rivalry between the two cities; and there was competition amongst the *picós* of one city (S. Reyes 2015).

Cover versions: a brief recognition of black culture

Música africana, also called *champeta africana*, was played at *picós* and released by local record labels, and soon the Colombians took an interest in recording their own versions of the tunes they loved so much. Champeta singer Charles King (2014) states that people “did not understand the content of the [*música*] *africana* songs because some of them were in Swahili, in French or in English, and people just identified with what they understood.” Moreover, constant travelling to Europe and Africa was expensive and the small record labels were seeking a different source of income.

In the cultural transformative process, when two or more cultures are confronted with and influence each other, creativity and innovation are the key elements (Mintz 1974, 14). In

the early 1980s, the *costeños* began to demonstrate their cultural creativity by making their own versions of African and Afro-Caribbean songs. As mentioned earlier, songs imported to *La Costa* had their labels ripped off to conceal their original identity. Now, in the 1980s, Colombian artists moved a step further and started to cover and reinterpret popular Afro songs. Isaac Villanueva, producer and art director, for instance, created several bands to cover African songs for Discos Fuentes.¹² According to him, he invented around ten groups, but nearly all were different combinations of the same musicians. The basis was the band of Fruko, who's actual name was Julio Estrada.

Fruko is a remarkable figure in Colombian music history. He is a musician, composer, and orchestra director, and has been engaged in a variety of music styles in his life, amongst others, salsa and cumbia.¹³ Sidney Reyes, radio announcer from Barranquilla, explains that Fruko merged African music with tunes from *La Costa* already in the 1970s (2015). This was a path-breaking undertaking since this new development had only just begun to gain ground in this region and *música africana* and the *picós* were hardly known beyond the coast. In this context, groups like The Latin Brothers, Los Líderes, Wganda Kenya, AfroSound and others emerged (Pérez 2011; S. Reyes 2015). Wganda Kenya, to take one example, was a group exclusively created to play African and Antillean covers. They became known for the song *Shakalaodé*, a cover of the cover of Fela Kuti mentioned above (i.e. *Shakalaodé* is the cover of *Shakalao* which is the cover of *Shakara*). Within Wganda Kenya, Fruko was band leader and the later salsa legend Joe Arroyo was also part of the group. Wganda Kenya was a big success and *Shakalaodé* was released in 1976, only four years after Fela Kuti had released *Shakara* (Analog Africa 2012, 13).

The development and increasing popularity of Afro music in Colombia has to be set in the global context of the rise of black music and the increasing visibility and popularity of African-derived culture. The covering of *música africana* by Colombians in the 1980s

occurred in a decade of increasing visibility of black communities, on a world-wide scale. In Europe, there were several movements of numerous minority groups with a strong ethnic focus; African decolonization was completed; music from Africa was on the rise and gaining popularity, especially music from South Africa which was instrumented in the struggle against Apartheid. In 1981, MTV (Music Television) was launched, and in 1982, (still) black Michael Jackson released *Thriller*, the best-selling album in the history of music. Other black musicians started their global careers and by the end of the decade, hip hop was spreading around the world. The global attention for black social and political matters also furnished black culture in Colombia with an increased visibility. This time coincided, amongst other developments, with the international interest in Palenque de San Basilio and the touristic opening of the country. The Caribbean coast, and particularly Cartagena whose old town district received recognition as world cultural heritage by the UNESCO (2017) in 1984, became a major site of attraction for international tourism but, at least equally important, for Colombian tourists from the interior of the country. In Palenque, an ex-maroon enclave near Cartagena, former escaped slaves and their offspring had been able to maintain an autonomous culture of resistance, paired with the survival of numerous African cultural elements and a very own creole language called Palenquero. Since the 1970s, linguists, being the forerunners of the scholarly interest in this community, and the expansion of the profession of historians who came to shift more attention to social histories and ethnic minorities, intensified the attention the village was receiving from the outside.¹⁴

The focus on blackness which was suddenly in vogue furnished *música africana* and its Colombian cover versions with popularity. The role of the local record companies is important in this regard. Sound engineer Eduardo Dávila, for one, states that Rafael Machuca, founder and producer of Discos Machuca, was said to have been a great admirer of South African singer Miriam Makeba. Machuca became interested in recording a whole LP with

cover versions of Makeba's songs. He hired Dávila to put a band together. Dávila, in turn, chose Amina Jiménez, a young singer from Soledad, a town south of Barranquilla, who had already gained musical experience with the orchestra of Pacho Galán. Jiménez adopted "Myrian Makenwa" as her stage name and the project "La Extraordinaria Myrian Makenwa" was born in 1981 (Analog Africa 2012, 23-25). Pacho Galán is a figure similarly famous to Fruko. He gained great national popularity in the 1940s and 1950s with his orchestrated form of cumbia. It is worth noticing the interplay of all these different music styles in the creation of the new sounds.

In a later interview with Carlos Estrada, record collector and DJ from Barranquilla, Jiménez explains that as a result of piracy, *costeño* producers lost the incentive to travel to Europe to buy licenses of records they wanted to release on *La Costa*. Therefore, "Machuca and Discos Tropical decided to record African songs as close as possible to the original using talented local musicians". Jiménez goes on to state that for her the recordings were difficult because she was not familiar with the language the lyrics were in. So, she ended up improvising and making her own version of the songs (Analog Africa 2012, 24). It seems that the individual artists enjoyed great independence in how to take up the projects proposed by the record labels. Interestingly, Jiménez adds that the day after the recordings she went to see Rafael Machuca to collect her money and never again heard of that record—until the day of the interview with Carlos Estrada in 2012. Apparently, not all the Colombian artists recording covers of *música africana* enjoyed success with their projects.

An artist that indeed was famous in the 1970s is Abelardo Carbonó. Since the re-discovery of Afro music from the 1970s and 1980s by international music lovers in the last years, he has been experiencing a renewed interest in his music, too. Analog Africa (28-29) describes his style as follows: "The body of his arrangement [is] typically Colombian but the soul of the song[s] comes in form of kenya-inspired, congo-submerged psychedelic guitars,

persistently weaving their sparkling riffs into the music, creating something unique and consequently making him one of Colombia's most sought after musician[s]". They published an interview with him in which he states that one of the first songs with his band, Grupo Abharca, was titled *Shallcarri*. He composed the lyrics to that song on the basis of a book written in Wayuu (a Colombian indigenous language) and chose the title swapping the first and second half of the town name Carrizal so that it became "Shallcarri" (Analog Africa 2012, 28-29).¹⁵

An observation that can be made from the information on Wganda Kenya, Myrian Makenwa and Abelardo Carbonó is about language and lyrics. Although the majority of the song titles were in Spanish, the lyrics were often composed of other languages but in a way that linguistically they did not make sense. Wganda Kenya just imitated what they regarded was a West African language, Myrian Makenwa improvised the lyrics, and Grupo Abharca even made use of the Colombian indigenous Wayuu language for a song supposed to sound like African music.¹⁶ The above mentioned Colombian artists that covered African and Afro-Caribbean music are just a fraction of the multitude of musicians, singers, and producers that engaged in the local recording of Afro-inspired music. All the record labels from the coast and the interior alike spawned Colombian artists who either covered African or Afro-Caribbean songs, or took great inspiration from those bands. It should be emphasized that almost none of the Colombian cover bands and artists experienced any major international exposure (Analog Africa 2012, 13).

Picós and failed mestization

It is of importance to be aware that the owners of the local record labels involved in the production of the cover versions as well as many of the artists were not Afro-descendants. Apart from Joe Arroyo, who was black, the protagonists mentioned tend to be *mestizos* or

very light black. Also, the involvement of the most successful artists of the African cover versions in other genres like cumbia, vallenato, and salsa, points to an intent to incorporate this music into the Colombian mainstream musical landscape. Clearly, some players in the music business recognized the musical value. The problem that arose in this context was that *música africana*, because it was originally consumed by poor black men,¹⁷ evoked racial prejudices and stimulated rejection as an underclass culture. Record label owners, being the ones providing the infrastructure and having at least some cash at hand, made some attempts to get rid of the negative stereotypes attached to champeta.

Felito Records started in 1980 to have their own recording studio which was by then, after the Tropical studio, the first modern and well equipped studio in Barranquilla. It was common practice to release compilations consisting of songs of different music styles, like cover versions of *música africana* together with vallenatos, to try the market and to see which artists enjoyed the highest reception in order to record a single album with those ones afterwards. Owner Felix Butrón (2015) explains that when they started to record and distribute Afro-sound music they did so under the name *terapia* instead of *música africana* or champeta. They believed this would appeal to people more and intended to take away the “stratified” character attached to the term champeta. It was only in the mid-1980s that Felito Records first released a record under the name champeta. When the record labels started to contribute their own releases, they even created sub-brands in their catalogues to distribute compilations of *música africana*. Felito Records had such a sub-brand called Congo Records.

At that point, champeta music found itself at a point where many other rhythms and styles had been before as well, i.e. at the threshold where it is decided whether a music stays a regional or class expression, or becomes more widely accepted. In Colombian music history, the incorporation of regional music into the national musical landscape was not exceptional in the twentieth century. The most well-known examples are cumbia and vallenato which both

originated on *La Costa*. Cumbia and vallenato both used to be music styles consumed by the lower classes; the former had very strong Afro-Colombian features, the latter a clear rural, peasant background.¹⁸ The good reception of *costeño* music in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s in the interior of the country was based on the navigation of the music business by record companies from Medellín. The interference transformed it and allowed a national industrial elite to appropriate itself of this regional music. This appropriation, vaguely described as modernization, entailed simplifications in the organization of the music to make it appeal to a wider audience (Wade 2000, 144-147); record label owner Ben Redjeb (2014) calls this “whitewashing.” Neither the racialized *La Costa* as the musical cradle of nor the socio-economic status of the music’s fan base did hinder earlier rhythms from being ripped of their ethnic origins and being incorporated into the national project.

Yet, with champeta, despite some efforts in the 1980s, it did not happen. The importation of original African music, the strong focus on blackness, and macro developments that backed up black culture worldwide clearly played a part. Still, it cannot doubtlessly be assessed why it was not durably mestized, yet the *picós* might give an answer. *Música africana* was from the very beginning tightly connected to these sound systems. This does not mean that prior to the 1970s, the *picós* did not play other music as well but champeta and *picós* came to enter a symbiosis over time whose interconnectedness lasts until this day. In 1960s, the music which was transmitted through the *picós* was the music people would commonly listen to, as Carlos Estrada tells. This included cumbia, porro, *la guaracha* of Aníbal Velásquez, the orchestrated music of Pacho Galán, and particularly salsa; and this was also the music that was consumed in the Carnival dances and at family *fiestas* (2015). Thanks to the arrival of *música africana*, the *picós* experienced a high point in the following decade, with the 1970s being the era of the *picó clásico*. Countless amounts of these sound-systems existed on the Colombian Caribbean coast. Sidney Reyes claims that there were more than a

hundred in the 1970s and 1980s in Barranquilla. They were of all sizes but the big ones were more than two meters high and of almost the same width and were painted with magnificent colorful drawings.¹⁹ They had an extremely powerful sound and “were admired by the people” (2015).²⁰

In order to make the whole picture of African music being played by the *picoteros* more concrete, Samy Ben Redjeb narrates about a music competition taking place in Barranquilla in July 2007. The procedure is still very similar to the ones in the 1970s and 1980s, and therefore a good example to give an insight into how these competitions looked like. Ben Redjeb reports that the DJs selected an African, a Cuban and a salsa track for the competition which took place at El Taboga, a salsa bar in the city center.²¹ The competitors had to score with the condition of the vinyl, the rarity of the track, and the overall quality of the performance. Under the influence of *aguardiente* (national liquor of anise and sugar cane) the competition went on until the morning. Minus points would be imposed if the record skipped or when there were prominent background noises. The overall aim always was to play an *exclusivo*, but if another DJ then pulled out the same record from his bag, the disgrace was severe. The winner of the competition of that night received a considerable amount of money which “was immediately invested in more *aguardiente*” (Analog Africa 2012, 5-6). Another sort of competition could happen between two rivalling *picós* about sound. The *picós* would be positioned confronting each other and they would play at the same time, slowly increasing the volume until the amplifier of the one or the other *picó* collapsed (Butrón 2015).

The colorful, creatively painted, huge sound systems in combination with an extremely loud sound attributed to the followers of *música africana* and champeta an audibility and visibility that were unprecedented. And since the followers were mainly African-descendant lower-class men, it consequently abetted their claim to space. *Música africana* and its cover versions were also not the final evolution of champeta music on *La*

Costa. From the mid-1980s on, *champeta criolla* emerged (see next chapter); its emphasis on blackness and the linkage it set between Palenque and Cartagena furnished *costeño* culture with an even deeper historical and Africa-related consciousness. The embedment of champeta within the African diasporan music scene also worked as a mental bridge between the village and Africa (Martínez 2011, 151-152; Pacini 1996). This connection to the African Diaspora and the “homeland” Africa was important since Afro-descendants and, even more so *palenqueros*, had long been neglected and discriminated against by their own government and the society they were living in. Analog Africa, recognizing this link, refers to the emergence of Afro-Colombian popular music as a “story of intersecting destinies across fantastic geographies and spontaneous meetings that awoke the linkages of a dormant diaspora” (10). This connectivity to the Diaspora has to be felt and articulated, and the consumption of and participation in diasporic music can strengthen this feeling of belonging because a common music works as a common experience. As Paul Gilroy (1993, 81) has pointed out, the cultural system of the Black Atlantic is based on the shared experiences of displacement, exile, and oppression and inspires a transnational identity which functions as a connector within the African Diaspora in the Americas, the Caribbean, and in Europe.

***Champeta criolla* and its informal production**

Amongst the many groups who recorded songs *á la africana* with record studios in Barranquilla and Cartagena in the 1970s and 1980s was Son Palenque, a traditional music band from Palenque. The music played by them was pioneering because they fused traditional music from Palenque with modern arrangements of bass, guitar and saxophone. At Felito Records, they worked with the famous sound engineer Eduardo Dávila and the highly-praised musician Abelardo Carbonó (Munster Records 2011), both mentioned previously. As a couple of the cover versions being produced on *La Costa* imitated alleged African languages, some

palenquero musicians dared to also record songs in their own, Bantu-derived, language. Son Palenque was one of them. When he was a dancer in Son Palenque, Viviano Torres, regarded by many as pioneer of *champeta criolla*, got inspired by other *palenqueros* who composed songs in the Palenquero language, like vallenato musician Juan Reyes (Torres 2015).

In 1982, the Festival de Música del Caribe, an international music festival influenced by world music, was initiated in Cartagena. Son Palenque participated in the second festival in 1983. Torres claims that he admired the African and Caribbean musicians whom he saw on stage. He decided to study music in order to be able to fuse the rhythms of Palenque with the tunes he had heard in the festival. His aim was to create a harmonized music which would be more broadly accepted. Torres lamented that Son Palenque and other traditional groups were invited only to folkloric celebrations and remained ignored over the rest of the year. Yet, most of the members of Son Palenque were not convinced by the new path Torres was striking and he developed musically away from them. In 1985, he founded Ané Swing with the idea of performing music as a mixture of African styles and Palenque rhythms (such as chalupa, bullerengue, lumbalú, and the *sones palenqueros*) and won over Charles King and Melchor, both from Palenque, as background singers (Torres 2015). The fusion of Ané Swing with the insertion of modern instruments like guitar, electric piano and brass paved the way for the next level of *champeta* which would come to be known as *champeta criolla*. They sang in Spanish and Palenquero and made up their own lyrics. *Champeta* singer Louis Towers (2015) adds that at a certain point people believed that Viviano Torres spoke several languages but he was just emulating random extracts from the lyrics of African singers.²²

The vast majority of stakeholders in *champeta* underline the importance of the Festival de Música del Caribe for the development of this music. The sensation about it was that it brought African and Caribbean artists to the city who used to be listened to and celebrated at the *picós* (M. Reyes 2015). Although the festival had an entrance fee, representatives from all

the *estratos*²³ (strata) went to see the shows. Whilst the Cartagenian middle classes were both curious and remained skeptical about the new musical influences, newspaper articles increasingly covered Afro-Colombian music in a positive light by around 1985 (Patiño and del Río 2010). To a certain extent, the festival acted as a catalyst for Afro music and the middle classes were stimulated by the attention the festival received on an international level. Louis Towers claims that the festival helped put an end to the social stigmas that existed towards African-derived music (2015). Earlier, the *palenqueros*, who had a significant share in the development of champeta, used to be exposed to mockery and derision, as Viviano Torres (2015) narrates: “People who had this colonist mentality mocked us for our talking, for our singing, for our manner of dressing. But the festival saw in this a manifestation.”

Torres and Towers are clearly right that the reputation and social situation of *palenqueros* improved during that time. It is certain that Colombians from the interior took more notice of Palenque and *La Costa*, yet not as a reference of identification. Rather, they considered the region as something that was interesting but still external to the national project, a sort exotic curiosity which was in line with the global cultural developments of the 1980s and 1990s and which brought international attention to the country as a whole. That champeta music was not seen as belonging to Colombian mainstream culture became obvious when Viviano Torres and his band Ané Swing, despite their popularity after their first participation in the festival in 1986 and the fact that they were listened to all over Cartagena, did not manage to get a deal with any record label. After weeks of efforts and chains of coincidences, Ané Swing eventually obtained a contract, yet not with a Colombian record company but with Kubaney Records from Miami. His first record of champeta music with the lead track *Permiso* was released in the US under the name of *terapia* with Spanish and Palenquero lyrics (note that they did not use the term champeta). Torres noticed during his tour in Florida that his song was played widely on the radio. However, Kubaney Records

showed no interest in releasing the album in the Colombian market as well but Ané Swing's success in the US soon attracted the attention of the Colombian labels that initially had refused them. After some time of constant back and forth, Torres ransomed himself from Kubaney and signed with Codiscos in Medellín (Torres 2015).

Colombia gives in many ways the impression that it only comes to value its own distinct cultural achievements when external recognition, preferably from abroad, takes the lead. The fact that Ané Swing eventually signed with a Colombian record label did not facilitate the endeavors of others to come. *Champeta criolla* was steadily gaining more supporters since the mid-1980s and Viviano Torres motivated many others to follow his suit, a lot of them being *palenqueros*. One of them was Louis Towers. He confirms the non-interest of the labels in *champeta criolla* (2015). Producer Humberto Castillo adds that there existed many labels but on the coast they were small, family-run companies, few owning pressing machines and many of them with poor distribution circles. The ones from the interior, especially Medellín, regarded *champeta criolla* as too regional a genre to put much effort into nationwide distribution. Additionally, they were discouraged by the social stigma associated with it (2015). The record deal Ané Swing and Louis Towers obtained have to be seen rather as an exception. It was always very hard work to convince the labels and it was never a lucrative business. *Champeta* was still happening outside mainstream and the interest of the music industry was meagre and only happening punctually.

The development of *champeta criolla* from the 1980s on and throughout the 1990s was mainly furthered by young Afro-descendent men (many of them with connections to Palenque) and tightly connected to the *picós*. Since it was so difficult for *champeta criolla* artists to find record deals, *picó* owners and other informal entrepreneurs in Cartagena started to take over the production processes. They had been active in a comparable way before when they had sent their own people to find Afro music abroad. In 1996, Humberto Castillo did his

last trip abroad to buy *música africana*. He explains that in the same year “Yamiro Marín initiates with Chawala a radical change. I say in 96 because then I do the last trip financed by a person from here from the city called Jesús María Villalobos, “El Perro” [“The Dog”]. And it is The Dog who initiates with Chawala the production of *champeta criolla*” (2015).²⁴ This production was started on a quantitative scale by small, local, informal businesses in the 1990s and champeta artists gradually moved away from begging the record labels to contract them. Castillo’s professional re-orientation is the best illustration of this development: Having worked at Felito Records in Barranquilla before, he now switched to the informal champeta production in Cartagena.

Noraldito Iriarte Arias aka Chawala with his *picó* El Rey de Rocha is the most famous example of this new era. He produced the most successful champeta artists together with his associate Yamiro Marín who functioned as director of the label Rocha Disc (Towers 2015). El Rey de Rocha is still the most popular *picó* in Cartagena; all the champeta singers used to and still have to go past him. He is said to have the right touch and always knows when a song will take off. In one of his rare interviews, Chawala states that “I don’t regard myself as the best, but I have a good ear to know which song will be a success. I help them [the artists] both with the tunes and with the lyrics. I contribute my grain of sand”. Under him, artists like Hernán Hernández, Rafael Chávez, Viviano Torres, Louis Towers, Charles King, Melchor Pérez, El Afinaíto, El Sayayín, and Mr. Black emerged and “all of them passed by my hand” (Martínez 2015). Like the songs of *música africana* before, *champeta criolla* artists also had to always be promoted by the local *picós*. And just like with *música africana*, the Bazurto market in Cartagena continued its importance as center of the musical world of Afro-descendent *cartageneros*. Champeta producer Manuel Reyes describes the informality of the champeta business as that the owners of some *discotiendas* (record or CD shops) became music producers: “The boys brought the songs to them, sung in *a cappella* or perhaps they put

[...] a *maqueta de música* [demo tape], they played background music and sang. A *pista*, they played what they called a track. So, if they liked it, it was recorded” (2015).

Yamiro Marín of Rocha Disc was one of the owners of the *discotiendas* at Bazurto market. Reyes goes on explaining that “this place was considered as the temple of champeta because there at every time and every day you found champeta singers and musicians visiting the producers” (2015). These producers were small entrepreneurs who recorded *champeta criolla* and had good connections to the local *picós* where the music was played. They did not grow rich with their activities; the working-class environment of the Bazurto market underlines this.²⁵ The champeta artists of the first generation, Charles King, Melchor, Elio Boom, Louis Towers and Boogaloo, headed by Viviano Torres, could not really make a living out of their music either, although they received some money for recordings and performances and had a proportionate stake in the sales (M. Reyes 2015; Towers 2015). Champeta artists and producers remained poor and excluded from dominant society. With the transition from *música africana* to *champeta criolla*, the meaning of the *picós* did not decrease but shifted. Whereas people earlier went to their favorite *picós* to listen to the music (*exclusivos*) that they could only listen to there, the *picós* now became associated with specific artists. The singers were promoted and backed up by the *picoteros* who in many cases also functioned as producers. Even when the CD was entering the market in the 1990s and piracy was facilitated, the *picós* kept going to the lower *barrios* where they maintained their monopole status as trend-setters and transmitters of the most fancied music. At the same time, the invention of the CD also allowed members of other than the lowest classes to consume champeta without having to enter the neighborhood of low socio-economic status, as noted by Michael Birenbaum (2003, 209-210).

Nourishing blackness and cultural misunderstanding

Whereas *música africana* was equally consumed in Cartagena and Barranquilla, and the cover versions were mainly promoted by record labels from Barranquilla, *champeta criolla* originated in Cartagena. When *champeta criolla* evolved, *champeta africana* experienced a strong decline in Cartagena. In Barranquilla, by contrast, it prevailed (Castillo 2015). From the 1980s on, when in Cartagena the trend was slowly moving away from *música africana* and towards *champeta criolla*, in Barranquilla the people kept consuming the former. This is the point when the musical trajectories of the two cities significantly diverged. Cartagena became the center of *champeta criolla*, Barranquilla stayed with Afro-sound music that kept being geared towards the African music from the 1970s and 1980s.²⁶ Since the terminology is not very clear and usage of names varies, Barranquilla's *música africana* and Cartagena's *champeta criolla* are often put under the vague umbrella of champeta music. Hence, both cities have the claim of being the cradle of champeta. In the Cartagenian champeta scene, Torres is regarded as the man who invented *champeta criolla*. But Barranquilla has its own champeta pioneer as well. As Abelardo Carbonó explained, “[t]here was always an ensuing rivalry between Cartagena and Barranquilla. In Cartagena they say Viviano Torres was the precursor of Champeta while here, in Barranquilla, they swear it to be Abelardo Carbono. Sometimes people ask me, ‘Are you the creator of Champeta?’ I reply, ‘Esa vaina me tiene sin cuidado (who cares?)’” (Analog Africa 2012, 29).²⁷

Albeit *música africana* is original African and Afro-Caribbean music and its cover versions maintained a strong African influence, *champeta criolla*, due to the visible participation of lower-class black men and the significant involvement of Palenque, put an even more obvious focus on blackness. And so it came that Cartagena, formerly Spanish America's largest slave port, which historically had ranked first in oppressing its Afro-descendant population now gave birth to the most self-confident expression of Afro-Colombian culture. In fact, champeta mirrored the urban realities of Afro-descendants in

Cartagena with rural backgrounds, or, in the words of Nicolás Contreras, champeta is an expression of the urbanization of ancestral folklore (2003, 34). Palenque is the best exemplification of this observation since many *palenqueros* in Cartagena frequently travelled back and forth between the village and the city, i.e. between the place that preserved their past and the place that symbolized modernity.²⁸ Palenque plays an indispensable role in champeta music, yet, as Luis Gerardo Martínez (2011, 151-52) has shown, champeta also impacted the cultural development of Palenque.

Besides the historical resistance of black people to their enslavement (most visible with Palenque),²⁹ the 1990s constituted a new period in which African-descendent people in Colombia resisted their social exclusion and political impotence. On a global scale, this decade brought with it processes of social liberalization and the rise of multiculturalism. The realization of the latter is of special importance for the Colombian context because it culminated in the new Constitution of 1991 and the Law 70 of 1993. Article 7 of the Constitution for the first time recognized the multi-ethnicity of the Colombian society. Furthermore, the Law 70 included explicit references to black communities and a clear strengthening of their rights and thus increased their visibility in the public and political realms. During this time, *champeta criolla* was slowly taking its place in the city of Cartagena. Besides resisting its appropriation by dominant society, champeta also gave a voice to the marginalized black population to call attention for their precarious situation.³⁰ This was, moreover, very different to the consumption of African music whose lyrics were hardly understandable. The new Constitution allowed Afro-descendants to claim their own space, and they did so very loudly through the *picós* and more and more in the Spanish language. Hence, as Ligia Aldana has also claimed, champeta “has become a political site that allows the performance of a public identity” (2013, 392).

When *música africana* was sufficiently backed up by nationally known *mestizo* artists, it enjoyed the attention of the Colombian music industry. *Champeta criolla*, by contrast, was interwoven with Palenque and the lives of *palenqueros* and other African-descendants in Cartagena. Paradoxically, there existed in the city radio programs like *Soweto African Beat* and *Arriba Caribeño* which played African and Afro-Caribbean music and supported South-African anti-Apartheid struggle and the liberation of Nelson Mandela. Yet, champeta was not part of the portfolio because the owners and program directors of the radio shows did not allow it. They were in their majority white entrepreneurs from the *costeño* elite who had no interest in promoting a socially disrespected music and raising the impression that they were supporting a violent under-class culture (M. Reyes 2015). Besides, champeta was also seen as of bad musical quality, disharmonized, and vulgar.³¹

The perception by non-black Colombians of this music as of inferior quality and of lacking inner conformity refers to a common cultural misunderstanding between different social classes or ethnic groups. Gerhard Kubik has labeled this cross-cultural misunderstanding (2010, 1). Pierre Bourdieu has stated in *Distinction* that art and cultural consumption are *a priori* determined “to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences.” According to him, one’s taste is asserted by the rejection and intolerance of the tastes of others. This aesthetic intolerance can appear in highly violent forms and is one of the strongest barriers between the classes. The lowest classes, Bourdieu concluded, seem to serve only as negative reference points (2010, xxx, 49-50). Hence, champeta was only understandable in its essence for the *champetíos*. White, indigenous people, and ethnic members from other social classes were not able to grasp the “philosophy” of this music. This led to clashes between black and non-black *costeños*, as Humberto Castillo (2015) underlines: “Champeta [is] the catalyst of the daily sorrows of the Afro-descendant community who on the weekends during their visits to the *picó* finds the emotional escape from their pities, their

poverty, [and] from the confrontation with the inquisitor on duty, who is called mayor; the Secretary of the Interior, who negates permission, who sabotages the dancing; from the police officer who in the majority of the cases is from the interior of the country and does not understand nor accepts that the black man has to listen to his music.”

The *champetúos* were facing rejection and misunderstanding from two sides, from the civil society and from the authorities who both could not relate to this kind of cultural expression on an ideational level, did not understand the essential meaning of the lyrics, and what social significance a *picó* had, amongst other difficulties. The higher classes, by rejecting and discriminating against the culture of the lower classes, distinguish themselves from them and attribute themselves a higher, more sophisticated status. Bourdieu’s considerations on the rejection of lower cultures by the elite remarkably resemble the heterogeneity in the formation of a national identity discussed by Peter Wade (2000). In multi-ethnic societies, like Colombia, ethnicity is alongside class likely to be a dominant mode of distinction.³² The boundaries between class and ethnicity are strict because society is very much stratified according to race³³ and due to general racist attitudes in Colombian society, ethnicity is the driving force behind the creation of a shared feeling of community and augments the exclusion of culturally others.

Conclusions

The overwhelming popularity of champeta on *La Costa* has been explained by a series of regional, national, and global implications. The emergence of champeta music out of the imported *música africana* tied it from the very beginning firmly to the African Diaspora. Although this cultural linkage had long existed, the Festival de Música del Caribe as a social trigger emphasized this connection. The participation of *champetúos* in the African Diaspora was, however, rather one-sided up until the late twentieth century. As stated above, the artists

covering *música africana* as well as the *champeta criolla* artists did not experience much international exposure. This observation connects to Roosbelinda Cárdenas who has stated that it was not until the Durban Conference Against Racism in 2001 that black Colombians were recognized as fellow African descendants by other members of the African Diaspora (2012, 122). Yet, the sporadic international attention they received, together with the general global developments of the 1980s and 1990s in favor of black consciousness and confidence further reinforced the *champetíos* in the path they were striking. They emancipated themselves from the restrictive music industry and took the production of *champeta criolla* into their own hands, turning it into an informal, alternative business. The role of the *palenqueros* is of foremost importance because it grants the champeta movement a clear emphasis on black resistance and black pride.

This focus on blackness paired with the very visible political and societal concessions Afro-descendant Colombians received in the last decades of the century, was precisely what hindered the mestization of the music. Moreover, the *picós* attributed this racialized underclass music an unprecedented visibility in the public space and stimulated dominant *mestizo* society to demarcate themselves from it. The discussions by Bourdieu on cultural taste as a tool to distinguish between classes helps understand the negative connotations attached to champeta and its consequent rejection by society. The strong regionalism in Colombian further aggravates this non-acceptance since segregation along class and ethnicity is regional (and *La Costa* is considered black and poor). Due to the high stratification of society different groups do not meet easily and it is the *mestizo* majority from the interior who rules on matters of national culture. This majority is, however, geographically, class-wise, and culturally situated too far away from champeta, so that a broader acceptance without a significant change in the music (“whitening”) has not taken place. The example of champeta music shows that it has become possible for Afro-Colombians to create and emphasize their

very own cultural practices. The local and regional popularity of champeta has led to an increased societal self-assurance and growing assertiveness in socio-political issues. However, Afro-descendant culture—although more accepted than before—takes place outside mainstream society and experiences insuperable regional limitations.

Music that gives a voice to socio-economically disadvantaged young people who in turn use this music to transmit political messages denouncing current living conditions did of course not find the approval of the ruling class. And the animosity and the poor echo champeta found in the interior of the country showed that multiculturalism does not equal social inclusion and that the habitus of the dominant society still did not allow for a positive reception of black cultural expressions. By the end of the millennium, champeta was spreading and gaining ground, but the political opposition was large; in some places it even came to be prohibited (Abril and Soto 2004, 16). This was especially dramatic because, as Birenbaum has claimed, champeta stood not really in resistance to dominant *mestizo* culture but was much rather concerned with its own social and aesthetic goals (2003, 202).

The demarcations drawn between *música africana*, the covers, and *champeta criolla* blur to some extent the interwoven and complex evolution of champeta. Yet, by sticking to this strict terminology it has become obvious that the histories of champeta in Barranquilla and Cartagena are not homogenous accounts. The equation of the musical development in both cities is a common error that springs from the fact that today, *champeta urbana*, the newest form of *champeta criolla*, is likewise celebrated by *cartageneros* and *barranquilleros*. Not very praised by the original lovers of *champeta criolla* from the 1980s and 1990s and of *música africana*, it now is the music of the younger Afro-descendant generations all over the Colombian Caribbean coast. It is a fusion of *champeta criolla* with Caribbean dancehall, reggaetón, and commercial pop music. It came up by the end of the 2000s and is the next step in the evolution of champeta music. *Champeta urbana* is also the kind of champeta which

now is enjoying more and more approval in the interior of Colombia. It seems that the adaption to modern global music styles is also paving the way for national acceptance. The history of champeta in the twenty-fifth century is, in this regard, a very different one.

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¹ The terms *champeta africana*, *música africana* and *terapia* all refer to the imported African and Afro-Caribbean music. *Terapia*, however, was also used later to refer to *champeta criolla*. The term *champeta* encompasses the whole musical development ranging from *música africana* over *champeta criolla* to the new *champeta urbana*. The latter is not part of this essay because its development is very different from the history of *música africana* and *champeta criolla* and took place only after 2000.

² This essay is mainly based on data collected in Bogotá, Cartagena de Indias, and Barranquilla, over a period of four weeks in February and March 2015. The majority of the 25 interviews were conducted in the mentioned period; additional interviews date from 2010 to 2014. The interviews from 2010 to 2014 were conducted by me personally in Colombia and Germany, and via telephone and Skype; and by record label owner Samy Ben Redjeb and record collector Carlos Estrada in Barranquilla. The overwhelming majority of the interviewees have a stake in champeta, either as singers, producers or key players in the record business. I would like to thank my interview partners, also those who do not appear in this article. Also, I extend my gratitude to Deborah Pacini who supported me with this article.

³ For his double release on Afro-Colombian music, Ben Redjeb produced a booklet with detailed accounts of his field research in Barranquilla which includes numerous interviews with and personal information on protagonists of Afro-sound music in Colombia.

⁴ See, for instance, Pacini (1993, 1996); Martínez (2011).

⁵ After World War II, massive processes of urbanization took place in Latin America with extensive migrations from the countryside to the cities (Almandoz 2015, 3). In Colombia, urbanization and rural depopulation increased even more by the middle of the twentieth century during the period of *La Violencia* (1946-1958) (Chacón et al. 2011, 369). Around 175,000 of mostly rural Colombians lost their lives and many more were displaced from their homes (Bushnell and Hudson 2010, 44). With the upcoming guerilla and paramilitary forces, rural conflict increased again from 1980 on when new waves of displacement took place. It was conditioned on the one hand by the increasing mass cultivation of marihuana and coca to serve the growing demand for drugs from North America and Europe and on the other hand by the steady opening of the country towards neoliberal measures and the sell-out of the countryside to multinational companies.

⁶ This observation was first made by Deborah Pacini who observed that world beat was in the early 1980s rather unknown amongst middle-class educated youth in Bogotá but consumed by African descendants on *La Costa* (1996, 432).

⁷ This is a simplistic approach. Other ethnic minorities like Colombians of Arab, Japanese, Jewish or Roma descent appeared in the country much later and do not constitute groups as numerous as the three mentioned.

⁸ The exclusion from developments in the interior of the country and from the national project is no new phenomenon. Alfonso Múnera has analyzed this deficient nation building (which also occurred in similar ways with other regions of the country) and stated that the Caribbean region did intend to be included during the era of the Republic but the elites of the interior had a different concept for the nation (1998, 166).

⁹ *La Costa* has strong historical connections with the Caribbean, in particular with Cuba (until the Revolution 1953-1959) which functioned as a Caribbean nodal point and had extremely important geostrategic value in terms of trade and communication. Other important connections were Santo Domingo and Jamaica (Vidal 2002, 183, 197). Before the introduction of steam river ships in 1823, travelling and transportation of goods from the Caribbean coast to the capital Bogotá over the Magdalena River took at least 28 days, whilst sailing from Jamaica to the Colombian coast usually took three days (Gilmore and Harrison 1948, 336). News, knowledge, ideas, material and cultural goods as well as people travelled much faster and easier between Cartagena or Barranquilla and the Caribbean islands than within the country.

¹⁰ Paris was the main destinations of immigrants from the (former) French colonies since the 1960s. See Dobie (2004).

¹¹ Pacini adds that it was the number and quality of the *exclusivos* which determined the price a *picó* owner could charge for his show. His success was not measured by sales figures but by the number of persons who followed a *picó* (1993, 95-96).

¹² Villanueva was also one of the first to travel abroad to buy music. In 1972, he went to New York, Miami and Puerto Rico as representative of Discos Fuentes (Pérez 2011, 10).

¹³ Fruko, being from the city of Medellín, achieved great fame in the 1970s with his salsa band Fruko y Sus Tesos which made him known throughout Latin America and beyond (Montiel and Quintero 2011).

¹⁴ Additionally, in 1972, *palenquero* (a person from Palenque) Antonio Cervantes aka Kid Pambelé won the world light welterweight championship in boxing (Cyber Boxing Zone). Since it was the first time this title went to Colombia, Cervantes became a national hero overnight and made his home village widely known.

¹⁵ The Wayuu are an indigenous group from the Guajira peninsula and are not connected in any organic way to Afro-Colombian music or culture. The anecdote by Carbonó suggests that he randomly came across this book and used the language to attach a mysterious/unknown quality to the song.

¹⁶ Compare to Sarah Daynes who has examined the use of Swahili by Peter Tosh. She has stated that it does not matter whether a practice possesses “real” Africanness but rather that Africanness is attributed and recognized. It is sufficient that a symbolic meaning symbolizes Africa for the individual and makes sense in their collective situation (2004, 28).

¹⁷ For studies on the relation between champeta and racialized sexuality, see Birenbaum (2003); on champeta and masculinity, see Aldana (2013); on masculinity in Colombia, see Viveros (2002).

¹⁸ For a detailed account on vallenato see Figueroa (2009); Oñate (2003); on Cumbia see D’Amico (2013). Now, both music styles are by society no longer perceived as tri-ethnic but rather as *mestizo* music (Vermejo 2015; Urango 2015).

¹⁹ Pacini confirms this observation stating that Colombian *picós* differ from sound-systems elsewhere by a strong emphasis on the visual dimension (1996, 442).

²⁰ Mosquera and Provansal point out that the *picós* and their *picoteros* generated micro-identities and loyalties amongst their followers, a fact which shows fragmentations on the insight of a phenomenon, which at the first glance appears to be homogeneous (2000).

²¹ In the 1960s, the *picós* were instrumental in the diffusion of *salsa dura* (“hard salsa”) (Contreras 2003, 35). Pacini claims in this context that *salsa dura*, much appreciated by Afro-*costeños*, was in the 1970s replaced by *salsa romántica*. People attending the *fiestas de picó* were not satisfied with this development of salsa nor with the upcoming vallenato which was a rural music with an emphasis on lyrics and storytelling rather than on rhythm. Both offered no basis of identification for the black low-class population and its harsh urban realities. Pacini summarizes that these changes in the Colombian musical landscape produced an “aesthetic vacuum” in which the arriving African music was received with open arms and could flower out (1996, 438).

²² Luis Gerardo Martínez has emphasized that *palenqueros* did not understand the lyrics of African music but that there is a cultural empathy which has to do with percussion, rhythm, and the vocalization of the lyrics (2011, 165).

²³ Colombian cities are divided into *estratos*, numbered from 1 (sometimes 0) to 6. The higher the number, the higher the—estimated—average living conditions in a neighborhood.

²⁴ Carmen Abril and Mauricio Soto claim that Yamiro Marín came up with the idea of producing *champeta criolla* locally in 1990 because it became increasingly difficult to get hold of *exclusivos* of *música africana* (2004, 15).

²⁵ The owners of the *discotiendas* Yamiro Marín and Jaime Arrieta, “El Flecha” (“The Arrow”) still work on the Bazarito market but due to the increased piracy of CDs and the emerging of MP3s they do no longer sell music but clothes (M. Reyes 2015). Also see Sanz (2011, 13).

²⁶ Louis Towers attributes part of *champeta criolla*’s success to the fact that it is also consumed and celebrated in Barranquilla (2015). Hence, although Barranquilla somehow ceded the champeta stage to Cartagena in the end of the 1980s/beginning of the 1990s by not actively involving itself in the production of *champeta criolla*, its contribution to the regional success of this music is still important by means of active support and consumption of this music.

²⁷ The discussion whether champeta was born in Barranquilla or Cartagena has been, amongst others, taken up by Abril and Soto (2004, 14). It is a concern of this article to make clear that the development of champeta was heterogeneous, non-linear, and complex. Further research will hopefully show the involvement and contribution of smaller places on *La Costa* and in the interior of the coast to champeta and the possible impact of San Andrés, a linkage which suggests itself due to the cultural and geographical proximity to the Caribbean and the number of migrants from there to Cartagena.

²⁸ The geographical proximity of Palenque to the city of Cartagena and the fact that many *palenqueros* inhabit the lower *barrios* of this city further illuminates the great success of this music in Cartagena.

²⁹ By incorporating Benkos Biohó—according to the legend, founder of Palenque de San Basilio—into the row of black heroes like Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and Aimé Césaire, Afro-Colombians developed their own discourse on black resistance in the late twentieth century (Cunin 2003, 36-37).

³⁰ See Maribel Barraza who analyzed the lyrics of a variety of successful champeta songs from 2000 to 2005. She concludes that the content is about everyday life, the singers express their identity through this music and common topics are betrayal, falling in and out of love, sex, social parasitism, arrogance, family problems, crime, and deprivation. Very often expressions have double meanings. The textual *modus* it follows is the narrative. The sociolect implicitly tells about economic deprivation, poor education, youth, and the masculine sex of the singers. They represent their reality which is full of shortages (2005, 77-78).

³¹ Furthermore, in Colombia there is a capitalist mechanism called *la payola* in which record labels pay the radio stations for playing their music (Butrón 2015; Rodríguez 2015). An employee of the record label Codiscos explained in 1984 with regard to *la payola* that “there is no direct relation between what is most listened to and what sells most” (*Semana* 1984). See also Bonilla (1980).

³² Additionally, new societal trends have to be taken into consideration by analyzing cultural capital, namely, that over the course of the last decades, popular culture has lost its vulgar stigma and high-cultural art forms are no longer the only ones regarded as suitable for groups with a high cultural capital (Trienekens 2002, 283).

³³ Mosquera and Provansal emphasize this thought by giving the example of Arabs and Arab-descendants in Cartagena who are considered white because they are usually wealthy (2000).