

MCM 3015

Ecuador and Colombia

Marimba Masters and Sacred Songs

*The Afro-descendent Musicians
of the Pacific Coastal Region*

MUSIC OF THE EARTH





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MARIMBA MASTERS AND SACRED SONGS
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Track Listing

ECUADOR

Tierra Caliente

1. *Caramba* 2:57
2. *Caramba* 3:04
3. *Andarele Vamanos* 3:57
4. *Caderona* 3:11
5. *Bambuco* 3:22
6. *Agua Larga* 4:17
7. *Fabrisiano* 2:17

La Voz de Niño Dios

8. *Arrullo* 3:08
9. *Arrullo* 2:46
10. *Bunde* (CARMELA) 2:48
11. *Arrullo* 3:32

12. *Arrullo* 6:35
13. *Arrullo* 3:04
14. *Arrullo* (EL NIÑITO DE ORO) . 2:50
15. *Arrullo* 3:57
16. *Arrullo* (BOBERITO
DE MI TIERRA) 5:11

COLOMBIA

Grupo Folclorico Alcadia Municipal de Buenaventura

17. *Currulao* 3:46
18. *Juga* (MULATA A DÓNDE VAS) . 2:42
19. *Bunde* 2:56
20. 'conuño warm down' 0:53

*Non-English musical types and styles are indicated by italics. Titles are in capital letters.
 Because these are field recordings, there may be some extraneous noise despite the high fidelity utilized.*

by Sacha Mirzoeff

Marimba Masters and Sacred Songs

The Afro-descendent Musicians of the Pacific Coastal Region

Esmeraldas is the town where the Spanish first made landfall and has been a major port ever since. It's roughly 250 miles northwest of the capital, Quito. The province of Esmeraldas, which has small towns such as San Lorenzo, Borbon, and the unimpressive beach resorts of Atacames, Sua and Muisne, stretches as far north as the southern coast of Colombia. The Lonely Planet guidebook has this to say about the town of Esmeraldas: "the beaches are dirty and the city has theft and drug problems. Avoid poor or ill-lit areas. Most travellers just spend the night on their way to somewhere else." What a welcome...

My experience on and around the

Pacific coast of Ecuador and Colombia was so intense and different from the rest of South America that even today I can smell certain local odours when I recall my time there! Esmeraldas, a poor and undeveloped area with fertile land, is still relatively slow and cumbersome to reach. My reaction on first arriving in the area was one of dismay. It's a far cry from the cool tranquility of the Andes; the air is close, dust and dirt are rife and there is little, if anything, for the casual tourist to visit. In addition there are dangers, in terms of safety, for the traveller. The people seemed gruff at first, to the point where I wondered if I was going to be able to achieve the aims of my ethnomusico-

logical study.

Eventually, after establishing a level of trust and showing my genuine interest in their culture and music, I found the people talkative. However, due to the fact that their history is mainly oral, I received many contradictory accounts of the local history. I quickly became used to the stifling heat and incessant flies and learned to relax into my position as a lone outsider.

The culture is changing very quickly, with Western influences playing larger and larger roles. The traditional music of the region is now mainly used for festivals and certain

holy days of the year (días de los Santos). There is also an emerging generation gap, with the elders knowing all of the customs, both sacred and secular, while the younger generation prefers the culture that Michael Jackson and Michael Jordan now offer. A laudable and successful project, set up by David Garcia, backed by major musicians and sponsored by UNICEF in 1995, was called "Chocolate, Coco y Miel," (Chocolate, Coconut and Honey). With workshops it helped train the homeless youth of Esmeraldas to play the marimba, learn the accompanying dances as well as build local instru-

ments in order to raise money. One of its main aims was to re-establish the dwindling traditional culture. Despite its relative success, it's an uphill battle and Esmeraldas is yet another example of a



La Voz de Niño Dios at home.

culture in danger of being irrevocably severed from its roots.

History, Geography and Demography

The northwestern coast of Ecuador and southwestern coast of Colombia are now largely populated by the direct descendents of the slaves who arrived from Africa 300-400 years ago. The original inhabitants of the land, however, go back to the pre-Colombian Tolita culture, who were noted for discovering platinum eight centuries before the Europeans. Various groups of Indians such as the Cayapas, Caras, Teames, Tolas and Atacames lived through fishing, cultivation of the land and salt before the arrival of Bartolomé Ruiz in 1526, which signalled the imminent arrival of the *conquistadores*. In 1553, a slave boat from Africa ran aground near Esmeraldas and 23 African slaves, led by Alonso de Illescas, escaped into the jungle to become the first free Africans there, co-operating and then fighting with the local Indians. Slavery grew quickly in the 16th and

17th centuries with arrivals from different areas of Africa. Along with Patía, Esmeraldas gradually became known as a place for escaped slaves to find refuge. Under Spanish colonial rule the local government was based in Atacames, but soon after independence in 1820, Esmeraldas became the largest town in northwest Ecuador. The immediate result of the new-found freedom was predictably more fighting, with the *mestizos* (mixed race), blacks, Indians and whites all battling each other: for most blacks the only change was the new *mestizo* masters.

Esmeraldas is a flat province, hot and humid, with navigable rivers flowing down from the Andean mountains. The lush vegetation and fertile earth produce many fruits and vegetables, but there is still extreme poverty. Fresh water is a relatively recent arrival in most places and is often cut off for days at a time. There are large wooded areas, while on the plains there are African palms, coffee and tobacco. Near the rivers the mangroves are endangered by the growing shrimp farming industry.

The density of the population in

this province is very low. The total population was around 250,000 in the late 1980s - approximately 16.6 people per square kilometer. Townships appear basic in standards of architecture and quality of materials used. The people speak a distinct dialect of Spanish, usually dropping all 's' sounds.

While the standard of education is not very high, people are generally aware of their past. I saw a young man wearing a T-shirt which had the image and name of Illescas, who was the first free African. However, some feel that their roots are lost: author Moreno Faginal speaks of "un proceso consciente aplicado a los esclavos para hacerles perder toda identidad de lengua, arte, religión y costumbres...." (a conscious process applied to the slaves to make them lose all identity of language, art, religion and customs).^{*} On the other hand, out of these torn roots and troubled times, a new tougher hybrid culture has grown, rooted in the

^{*} "Decimas Esmeraldeñas. Recopilación y Anyálisis Socioliteral." Laura Hidalgo Alzamora, 1982.

Catholic tradition but with many local variations and quirks, as is typical in South America. Music and dance have traditionally been the strongest identifying factor of this culture.

Culture, Beliefs and Practices

Most surprising of all the traditional local beliefs is the celebration which follows the death of a young child. Taken as a sign that the child has been transformed into an angel or saint who is returning to heaven, the family is joyous, singing *chigulos* and *arrullos* (which are also used in honour of the Holy Virgin and the Saints). The body is washed, covered in a white sheet and placed on an open table. At dawn, after a night of singing, the family places flowers and a crown of thorns on the head of the child, readying it to move to heaven. An example of a verse from a *chigulo*:

Niño lindo, Niño Dios
(beautiful child, God child)
niño para dónde vas (*bis*)
(Child for where you are going)
Niño se te vas al cielo
(Child you are off to heaven)

no me vayas a dejar (*bio*)
(don't leave me)
De la flor nació María
(from the flower born as Mary)
no me vas a dejar (*bio*).
(you're not going to leave me)

The traditional death rite of adults, however, does involve real mourning; there is no cause for celebration here. At the announcement of a death, the women close to the deceased quickly return home. Friends and relatives prepare for the wake. Men make the coffin box, while the women prepare the corpse: it is washed and put on a table with a candle at each corner. The doors and windows are left open, so that the soul can leave this world freely. That night the participants drink coffee and *aguadiente*, a popular alcoholic drink made from cane. All night the women sing *alabados*, slow sad songs, accompanied by a solitary drum. Traditionally this goes on for nine days (although I have never heard of one actually lasting that long). The soul goes around the village at night and it's dangerous, especially for children, to go out due

to the possibility of being abducted by this unsettled soul. At last a doll representing the soul is placed on the table, as the body originally was. It protects the living and sends the soul to its first stage of afterlife.

The rites for both children and adults are no longer fully practised by the majority of the populace. A generation ago the proportion of people practising was considerably higher. *Días de los Santos* (saints' days) are observed however, and reenactments are often done in shows, with a child acting dead on stage and the mother playing her part. The call and response songs are still used on holy days and saints' days, but decreasingly for funeral rites. The communal aspect of the music should not be underestimated. While recording my piece with "La Voz de Niño Dios" in one of the performer's homes in a poor area of town, a crowd gathered outside. One of the women even joined in with the actual performance, such was the level of knowledge of all of the songs. The front of the house was left open and people were also watching through the

window.

Another way that community and identity are reinforced is through the tradition of long oral stories told by the elders or respected people. Many of these stories are well known, but each storyteller will have his own elaboration. Typically the stories are full of animals, demons, ecstasy and violence. Three themes seem to dominate more than most: long journeys, combats and stunning sexual exploits. They include many phantoms or local spirits, both good and bad. Stories are still often told in performances today. The style of delivery is very exaggerated, with the aim being to keep the audience captivated and amused. *Decimas* are similar poems of 44 verses generally told by men and are handed down orally from generation to generation. There are 2 types, divine (in honour of the Virgin and saints) and human (dealing with native issues).

The playing of the marimba has always been a more secular pastime, with emphasis on social recreation, festivals and, most importantly, dancing. Having said this, there are still rituals involved. For every

rhythm, there is a corresponding dance. Indeed it is impossible to regard marimba music as a single entity: it is inextricably linked with various dances that accompany the music, the most well-known called the *currulao*. Other well-noted ones are the *juga*, *bunde*, *patacoré*, *la caderona*, *andarele*, *fabrisiano*, *carajo*, *agua larga*, *bambuco*, *agua corta*, *caramba*, *la tolena*, *torbellino*, *polka*, etc. Each has its own format, but often pairs of dancers stand facing each other, the men sometimes waving handkerchiefs and the women occasionally dancing with bottles balanced on their heads. Usually they dance in formation around their partner; joyous and strongly amorous overtones shape the dance.

Traditionally, in more rural locations (especially to the north and in the central coastal region), there used to be a special marimba house for all the playing and dancing, but few of these exist nowadays. In Esmeraldas at the time of my visit, there was a house specifically used for practice, teaching, workshops and playing. It was inconveniently placed next to a petrol station and a main road. However, despite the simplicity

of the surroundings, a veritable hive of activity lay inside.

Alberto Castillo is recognized as the modern master (maestro) of marimba in Esmeraldas and teaches workshops, mostly encouraging younger people to get involved in marimba playing, dance and manufacture. He is backed by David Garcia Velasco, a university professor and expert on the whole marimba culture, and the wise old Petita Palma, who has seen it all - from some of the oldest makers of instruments, such as Don Escobar, to the previous generation of master players. She still sings as a *glossador*, in other words, as a main singer. Alberto Castillo has extended the traditional method of playing by including more than one marimba at the same time. Thus on some of the recordings from "Tierra Caliente," you can hear 4, or even 5, players using 3 different-sized marimbas, all played in harmony. Castillo also encourages the manufacture of marimbas, as this provides one of the few forms of income.

The group from Buenaventura in Colombia used the official Casa de la Cultura to practice in, which also

featured a library and information on many aspects of the local culture and was more professional and better funded than the equivalent in Esmeraldas, Ecuador. This group's playing was strictly more traditional, in that they used only one marimba with two players. Some of the cultural differences between the two countries (which share the same cultural Afro-descendant roots) are demonstrated in their performance. Their first selection, a *currulao*, is the most common of all of the dances. Their second, the *juga*, is the most traditional of all Pacific dances and is the first dance in all of the fiestas. Perhaps most interestingly, their third choice, the *bunde*, is used to mourn the death of a recently deceased child. What is noteworthy is that the marimba is still used, whereas (as we already know from "La Voz de Niño Dios") in Ecuador, mourning songs do not feature a marimba in general - notice that "Tierra Caliente" did not choose to play a *bunde*. Here I have chosen to focus on one of many differences between the two countries. However, they share more common features than marked

differences, despite the fact that they have officially been separated for hundreds of years.

Instruments Used

The marimba, which looks similar to a wooden xylophone, is classified as an idiophone, although it has elements of aerophone as well, due to the resonators below the keys. It traditionally has 19 or 24 keys, although larger and smaller ones do exist. The keys, made of a hard wood called *chonta*, are placed on 2 rows of horizontal wood covered in a soft cushion and are bound together with cotton. Underneath each key a piece of cane or bamboo is suspended vertically. This piece acts as a resonator, and its size is relative to the size of the key. The keyboard is struck with 2 pieces of wood covered in rubber, or similar material, at one end. Traditionally the whole instrument was suspended, although today it often has transportable support pieces above and on the side.

The marimba is played by 2 people, a *tiplero* who looks after the top notes and the *bordonero* who plays the bottom part. The former guides the melody

and the latter plays the part of rhythmic accompaniment. They stand side by side while playing and the sound usually covers 2 to 3 octaves based in a heptaphonic scale.

The marimba's origins have been discussed for many years without any definite answers. What is obvious is that there are strong similarities with instruments from Africa. Widely noted is the similarity to the rongo, vivi rongo, nau rongo and galandi (or the African marimba) which originated in South Sudan. Similarities also exist with the marimba from Bantu, mandimba from the Congo and balfo from Mandingue. Certain commentators have noted similarities with Javan, Mexican and Guatemalan instruments (all 18th century onwards, developed from instruments originating in Africa). The first description of an Esmereldan marimba was by a voyager called Stevenson in 1808.

Two conunos (termed as male and female) and one bombo (two are sometimes used) are the accompanying drums. The bombo grande is a bimembraphone made from wood with deer skins (traditionally) and is

hit with a piece of wood. The conuno, a unimembraphone, is always played in pairs, with the male being larger than the female and having a deeper sound. It is made from wood (often balsa) with deer or calf skin and is placed between the thighs and played with the hands.

Guasas are shakers that provide further percussive accompaniment. Small pieces of wood are placed inside a hollow piece of cane or bamboo. Maracas are also occasionally used.

When vocals are used, the main singing is carried out by the *glossador*, and the answering or backing singing is carried out by *las respondedoras*.

Recordings

Tierra Caliente - August 29, 1995 in the local "casa de marimba," or rather the room that some of the local players practice in, located in a ramshackle 2-story house next to the main road in Esmeraldas.

Alberto Castillo - lead marimba player, *Gabriel Vidal*, *Veto Tobar*, *Carlos Martin*, *Hilda Flores*, *Petita Palma* - vocals, *Rene Coroso*.

La Voz de Niño Dios - August 28, 1995 in one of the performer's homes in Esmeraldas.

Main singer - Huila Rosa plus 4 to 5 backing singers and 1 male bombero.

Grupo Folclorico Alcaldia Municipal de Buenaventura - June 6, 1995 in the Casa de la Cultura (no audience present) in their practice room.

Norman Jota Ruis - dance director, *Buadilla Cuama* - musical director.

Acknowledgements

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Contributors

Sacha Mirzoeff is an ethnomusicologist who studied social anthro-

pology at Manchester University, UK. This work comes from a year spent in South America during 1995. He is currently employed as a travel writer and ethnographic film maker.

Suggested Readings

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La Cultura Negro del Litoral Ecuatoriano y Colombiano; un modleo de adaptacion étnica - Norman Whitten en revista Colombiana de Antropologia Vol XVII 1974.
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La Marimba - P.Luis de Giorgi 1977.
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Ritma y Melodica del folclor chocano - Pardo Torar y Pinzon Urrea 1961.
Colombia y Su Musica Vol 1 - Jose Portaccia Fontalvo.

Credits

Producer: Stephen McArthur
Co-Producer: Chris Mills
Booklet Design: Tim Newcomb