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Carnaval de Barranquilla: Hybridization Dynamics and Patrimonialization Process

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The carnival of Barranquilla, *el Carnaval de Barranquilla*,² is one of Colombia's most important cultural, economic, and social events.³ It is performed annually, four days before the Catholic celebration of Ash Wednesday, between February and March, in Barranquilla, on the northern coast of Colombia. The *Carnaval* brings together approximately 2 million people⁴ every year in a city with a population of about 1.2 million inhabitants, which places it among the largest carnivals in Latin America and the World.⁵

Every year, the *Carnaval* parades across the *Vía 40*, main street of Barranquilla, where groups of dancers and musicians show their performances, divided into different *comparsas*.⁶ The dances that are performed are framed within Colombian afro-Caribbean rhythms, especially *Cumbia*,⁷ which are the result of the mixture of African, Indigenous and Spanish culture. *Cumbiamba*, *Garabato*, *Guacherna* or *Mapalé*, among other dances, are mostly choreographies accompanied by African drums⁸ and indigenous wind instruments such as the *gaitas*⁹ and the *milllo*¹⁰ flute (see Fig. 1). The dances and lyrics are a representation of the hybridization of Colombian cultures, and the costumes show a deep influence of Spanish, Basque and Andalusian designs (see Fig. 2), but also a strong influence of African traditions that came with slavery during the colonial period. Over the last twenty years, dance companies have integrated elements of Samba and urban music into the traditional *comparsas*, transforming the traditional expressions and giving them a modern sound, sometimes far from what it may once have been.

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2 From now on, the Spanish word *Carnaval* is used to refer to the *Carnaval de Barranquilla*.

3 CONEO 2020.

4 Alcaldía de Barranquilla 2020.

5 CONEO 2020.

6 RAE 2022.

7 According to Colombian researcher Néstor Lambuley Alférez, the *cumbia* is a "4/4 binary accent system, with particular importance of the weak time. The counter-beat is not weak but has more rhythmic-expressive weight. The harmonies change their quadrature on the fourth beat". See LAMBULEY 1987: 90–99.

8 The drums of the different types of *Cumbias* are the *Llamador*, the *Tambora* and the *Alegre*. These are the basis of *Cumbia* along with the *Guache* and the *Gaitas*. See CONVERS and OCHOA 2008: 14.

9 The *gaita* is made from the wood of a type of cactus called *cardón*, its interior is hollow and at the back end it has a head formed of wax, in the centre of which is embedded a goose feather. The hollows of the *gaita* will be two if it is a "male" and five if it is a "female". See CONVERS and OCHOA 2008: 152.

10 The *milllo* flute is an aerophone instrument of indigenous origin, made from the wood of the *Bactris guineensis* palm known in Colombia as "Lata".



Fig. 1. Cumbia group in a parade with drummers and the leader playing the millo flute.¹¹



Fig. 2. Dance group. The women wear the traditional "polleras". The men wear an outfit similar to that of the San Fermin festivities in Spain.

¹¹ All pictures were taken by the authors during de 2008 and 2010 editions of the Carnaval de Barranquilla.

The *Carnaval* used to be made up of different dances that recounted exploits, agricultural celebrations, battles between indigenous people and Spaniards or slave rebellions. The dances fulfilled the function of representing historical events and preserving historical memory related with the colonial past (see Fig. 3).¹² Nevertheless, during the last two decades, dances of an agricultural nature are slowly mutating, their choreography transforming to meet a more mainstream aesthetics, losing some of their symbolism, context and meaning. This is the case with examples such as the disappeared *Danza de la langosta* (Lobster's dance), which recounted the peasants' anguish over the havoc this animal wreaked on their crops; or the transformation of the dances of the Indians, whose costumes increasingly resemble those of the natives of the United States more than those of the original peoples of the Caribbean region. Similarly, the *Cumbia* has changed from being danced in wheels to adopting a linear formation in order to better advance in the parades, thereby losing its traditional structure. The *Letanias* (see Fig. 4) is another expression in danger of disappearing due to the difficulty of including it in the large parades. The litanies consist of groups of men disguised in ecclesiastical attire who use the choral structure of Catholic mass prayers to launch criticisms, satires or double entendre jokes. They are the quintessential role of carnivalesque irreverence and are slowly being pushed back to the margins of the *Carnaval*. In the same way, in recent years the large groups of Colombian cumbia dancers or the more traditional Carnival troupes such as the *Son de Negro* (Black sound), the *Farotas* (see Fig. 5) or the *Cumbiambas*, have given way to the exotic colours and designs of groups of fantasy dancers with gigantic floats – much more akin to the aesthetics of the *Rio Carnival* than to the local celebration of Barranquilla – obeying the logic of consumption ultimately determined by what makes the celebration more attractive to tourists.



Fig. 3. Dancers in traditional attire of Afro-Colombian populations.

¹² MENESES 2005.



Fig. 4. A group of letanieros. Their letanias simulates, in a sarcastic way, the religious prayers typical of Catholicism using a vulgar language.



Fig. 5. Farotas. Group of men recalling the indigenous skill for camouflaging themselves as women to go unnoticed during battle.

Patrimonialization in the *Carnaval de Barranquilla*

Researchers consider that the origins of the *Carnaval* are interrelated with other smaller festivities from the region – such as the celebration of the *Candelaria* and *San Sebastian* festivities, between January and February – in cities and towns near to Barranquilla, such as Cartagena, Mompox, Santa Marta and along the delta of the Magdalena river.¹³ Although the first records of this celebration date back to the second half of the 19th century, it is only in the 21st century that its growth has increased significantly.¹⁴ This is mainly related to the UNESCO nominating the *Carnaval de Barranquilla* as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2003¹⁵ and subsequently including it on the Representative List in 2008.¹⁶

After the inclusion of the *Carnaval* on the UNESCO list, many expressions and traditions changed rapidly. All these festivities were condensed through a phenomenon of migration, both internal and external, driven by the positioning of Barranquilla as a port city of economic importance during the 18th and 19th centuries.¹⁷ This research deals with the UNESCO declaration that aims to safeguard our species' oral and intangible expressions¹⁸ and the challenges that arise from this task. The analysis of the changes observed in the *Carnaval*, starting with its process of patrimonialization in 2003, makes it possible, among other things, to question the effectiveness of UNESCO's safeguarding. This work intends not to critique the process and economic sustainability of the *Carnaval*, but to analyze which aspects have an influence on this intangible heritage of humanity in the Caribbean context.

The consolidation of the *Carnaval*, as a cultural industry¹⁹ – based on a multitude of small, medium and large size enterprises operating on a local and global scale thanks to the economic opportunities of the festivities – offers a setting for *essentializing*²⁰ and *commodifying*²¹ this artistic expression, which in turn can lead to what Valdimar Hafstein calls *folklorization*, in which the most significant impact is the “transformation of the way people view their own culture, its definition, and the way it is practiced”.²² Until the end of the 20th century, the *Carnaval* was a popular form of expression, allowing public participation and community interactions without consumeristic aim. With the conversion into a cultural industry, the roles have become more distant, the public increasingly playing the role of consumers or spectators, rather than actors in the *Carnaval*.²³

In order to discuss the challenges and criticisms of the UNESCO process of patrimonialization of intangible cultural expression, Valdimar Hafstein uses the concepts of *folklorization* (or *festivalization*) to explain the process by which the top-down safeguarding: “reforms the relationship of subjects with their own practices, reforms the practices (orienting them toward display through several conventional heritage genres), and reforms the relationship of the practicing subjects with themselves (through social institutions of heritage that formalize informal relations and centralize dispersed responsibilities)”.²⁴

With this process of creating a brand that is “safe for consumption”,²⁵ the tradition is modified according to market interests and alienated, taking what is attractive for consumption. *Carnaval* has gone from being a local celebration to becoming a show of international stature. Nevertheless its

13 ALARCÓN 2005: 76–90.

14 GRUPO DE INVESTIGACIÓN PENTÁPOLIS 2011: 216–218.

15 UNESCO 2003.

16 UNESCO 2008.

17 GOENAGA 2005: 24.

18 UNESCO 2008.

19 HORKHEIMER and ADORNO 1989: 50–70.

20 SAID 1979: 201–225.

21 MARX 1990 [1867].

22 HAFSTEIN 2018: 128.

23 BALSEIR 2005: 152

24 HAFSTEIN 2018: 128.

25 HAFSTEIN 2018: 137–139.

current dimensions are not sustainable and the environmental impact of the festivities (especially the production of waste during the festival days) has become a major societal challenge.²⁶

In its indicators for preserving intangible cultural expression UNESCO emphasizes “the protection and promotion of the sustainability of heritage, to ensure and encourage its potential contribution to development”.²⁷ The process of patrimonialization thus involves the selection of elements with a potential commercial and touristic value, which allow for economic exploitation.

In Barranquilla “commercialization, spectacularization, and external influence on the Carnival symbols” have been metamorphosing a popular tradition not only by commodifying cultural artifacts but also, and overall, transfiguring local musicality, aesthetics and cultural tastes in a short time lapse.²⁸ This reality could call into question the effectiveness and efficiency of the UNESCO initiative to safeguard intangible heritage. It also consolidated the hypothesis of a process through which cultural expressions and traditions are adapting to globalization, tourism, and consumption patterns. The process of *Carnaval* patrimonialization, in words by Owe Ronström, could be observed as a situation where “[n]ew elites represent themselves through new cultural forms, placed in new mindscapes, populated by a new type of historical subject of which, as yet, we see only vague contours [...] heritage as yet another mirror image, a homogenizing counterforce to the diversifying and globalizing forces of post- or late modernity”.²⁹

In this case, the UNESCO initiative would become a tool for what Hafstein calls “Protection as Dispossession”,³⁰ a process in which measures to safeguard an intangible expression end up dispossessing it and removing it from its origin and from the people who created it. The term “safeguard” entails first of all to save a cultural expression in danger and maintain it. It is, in other words, to identify and even to create an invisible threat that, if not neutralized, will end up annihilating the expression at hand. The UNESCO approach to neutralizing this threat is through a plan that ensures economic sustainability, thereby risking that this economic factor becomes the destroying threat it was intended to combat.

In determining what is heritage and what is not, UNESCO gains power over an expression: the institutionalization of *Carnaval* leads to control of this expression by an official power which means, among other things, highlighting the aesthetics, the form, and what is striking for commerce, over other elements such as creativity, background, and a critical vision of society that also form part of its essence.³¹ The centralized power in a social group disguises itself as popular and takes over the elements that interest it, discarding the rest.³² In this way, an organization is built and paraphernalia are defined, built under parameters accepted by the dominant social group, which paradoxically lead to a restriction of popular expression.³³

This is how a celebration becomes an institution with an official discourse and hierarchies. This organizational strategy is very important, but it excludes some cultural expressions that do not comply with the indicators established by tourism and spectacle.³⁴ A division then arises between the official event and the popular celebration, from which, in turn, peripheral micro-celebrations emerge located in the neighbourhoods away from the central spectacle. These peripheral expressions preserve what for generations has been the meaning of the celebration: a rebellion against institutionalization.³⁵

26 ZAPATA 2012: 47

27 UNESCO 2014: 133.

28 LINDO 2019.

29 ROSTRÖM 2014: 49.

30 HAFSTEIN 2014.

31 EICHLER 2020: 793–814.

32 HAFSTEIN 2018: 134.

33 ALIVIZATOU 2014: 9–22.

34 HAFSTEIN 2018: 137–139

35 CARDOVA 2012: 246.

The process of capitalization gives an economic value to each expression and even monetizes the participation in the different *Carnaval* exhibitions.³⁶ This also generates a segregation of social sectors and generations within a celebration that was intended to be inclusive, open to all of humanity, or perhaps all of humanity with sufficient resources to pay for it.

Carnaval becomes more of an exclusive show with every passing year, with seats and platforms from which the spectacle can be consumed. There is no doubt that this dynamic generates segmentation and exclusion.³⁷ Thus the concern emerges that the policies of patrimonialization promulgated by UNESCO may not really achieve the objectives that were set: the defence and protection of cultural traditions of a widespread and genuine nature.³⁸ Instead, they are serving to establish a profitable business model based on tradition.³⁹

It is also necessary to point out that *Carnaval* has historically been the showcase for the exhibition and subsistence of multiple artistic groups and traditions. These expressions have been affected by the consolidation of the logic of industry in *Carnaval*. The intensive commercial exploitation of *Carnaval* has relegated ancestral cultural expressions⁴⁰ or modified them to meet the aesthetic criteria demanded by the spectacle.

It appears that the greatest challenge facing *Carnaval* is the duality between traditional expression and industry. The *Carnaval* is impacted by the effects of commercialization and festivalization, facing changes not only in its administration but also in the modification of its structure, its aesthetics and above all, its musicality. This case can help to identify the risks faced by a cultural event during the process and the years following its nomination as an Intangible Heritage and its development as an industry. This specific example opens up possibilities for comparative studies on the effects that come with UNESCO's designations around the globe.

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36 *Mincultura* 2015: 21–38.

37 VIGNOLO 2014: 62–66

38 ALIVIZATOU 2014: 9–22.

39 ORO DE 2010: 411–412.

40 VENGOECHEA 2005: 90–96.

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