

Imagining the Past Through Music:
Drawing the Path of National Identity in the Music of the Costa Rican Band *Malpaís*.
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For some cultures, imagining the past is the key to preserve the national identity. The collective memory provides a historical framework to perpetuate the identities of the past into the present. New identities are constantly re-invented and re-imagined, giving cultural significance to history. In the construction of national identities, artistic manifestations become tools to reinforce national affiliation and to connect with national sentiments. Songs connect people in a powerful way, and either in the past or present, they help to construct new identities and new memories. In this paper, I explore events in the formation of national identity in Costa Rica through music.

Reconstructing the musical trajectory of nationalism in a short paper is impossible. However, through an analysis of songs by the Costa Rican band *Malpaís*, one can imagine a nation. From the present to the past, this modern band creates new images for the collective memory, which as cultural expressions of the past in the present, also create hopes for the future.

Drawing the path of national identity

The question of the construction of national identity comes up along with questions of multiple and individual new identities. Although the idea of Europe is present in the construction of colonial, and modern dominant identities in Latin America, we cannot deny the persistence of indigenous traditions. Therefore, the question of hybridity is necessary to better understand the formation of continental and national sentiments, to define national identity, and to understand how nationalism operates in time, place, and space.

Montserrat Guibernau¹ explains national identity as “a collective sentiment based upon the belief of belonging to the same nation or sharing most of the attributes that make it distinct from other nations.” (2007: 11) Such attributes are not static, nor are the feelings of the members of the nation. While collective memories connect to national sentiments, the images of events in the past and the present “tend to strengthen a sense of common identity.” (11) Guibernau clarifies that in the construction of national identity, the image of the nation responds to the dominant group, which within a territory defines a common history and shared culture, excluding all those who are not part of this group perspective. (11)

Costa Rica is not the exception, and although some values, like solidarity and empathy, emerge in relation to certain historical events that involve a national sentiment, nationalism as a tool to transmit national identity, is not always embraced as such by most of the population. An idea of citizenship² is perhaps stronger than nationalism,³ and although citizenship responds to the principles of popular sovereignty and democracy, the assumption of homogeneity exclude some sectors of the population. -I should point out

¹ Guibernau Berdún, M. Montserrat. *The Identity of Nations*. Cambridge: Polity, 2007.

² Citizenship: a) The position or status of being a citizen, with its rights and privileges.

http://dictionary.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/cgi/entry/50040486?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=citizenship&first=1&max_to_show=10

b) Citizenship is the state of being a citizen of a particular social, political, or national community [...] citizens should work towards the betterment of their community through economic participation, public service, volunteer work, and other such efforts to improve life for all citizens [...] Generally citizenship is seen as the relation between an individual and a particular nation. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Citizenship>

³ Nationalism: a) Advocacy of or support for the interests of one's own nation, esp. to the exclusion or detriment of the interests of other nations. Also: advocacy of or support for national independence or self-determination. [Whereas *patriotism* usually refers to a general sentiment, *nationalism* now usually refers to a specific ideology, esp. one expressed through political activism. In earlier use, however, the two appear to have been more or less interchangeable.] b) Nationalism generally involves the identification of an ethnic identity with a state. [...] a movement to establish or protect a homeland [...] emphasizes collective identity - a 'people' must be autonomous, united, and express a single national culture.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nationalism>

that there is an intention to change the Constitution. A legal project in Congress seeks to define Costa Rica as multiethnic and pluricultural⁴ - but it is still a project.

Musical manifestations contribute in the formation of a multiethnic and pluricultural memory, although the definition of the nation-state continues to be based on one of cultural homogeneity. But, does collective memory recognize both multiethnicity and pluriculturality as national identity? Is it possible to recognize national identity as a hybrid identity? Furthermore, how can we appropriately recognize and identify diversity in a world that is by all means diverse? Finally, is a single song able to illustrate and represent this national diversity?

Néstor García Canclini⁵ explains that the multiplicity of hybridizations is expressed in three elements: one (1), artistic manifestations, two (2) everyday life, and three (3), technological developments. (1989: xxv, xxvii) These elements are intrinsic in the creation of the modern and popular song and its combination creates a new hybrid cultural object. This the case of the songs discussed in this paper. Before listening to the music, it is important to make a distinction between commercial and popular music. This distinction is problematic, because nowadays, almost all-popular music is mass mediated, however, the intentions of commercial and popular music are different. In commercial music, the intention and interests of the industry predominate, and in popular music predominate the intentions of the artist.⁶ (Lipsitz: 5)

⁴ Proyecto de ley N° 17.150 para reformar el Artículo No.1 de la Constitución Política República de Costa Rica: "*Artículo 1.- Costa Rica es una República democrática, libre, independiente, multiétnica y pluricultural.*" (*ARTICULO 1o. - Costa Rica es una República democrática, libre e independiente.*)

⁵ García Canclini, Néstor. *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*. Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

⁶ Lipsitz explains that also the artist that works for the music industry has his/her artistic intentions, but since his/her work is mediated, we forget about it. (p. 5)

George Lipsitz⁷ says that commercial culture is neither high art nor folklore. For Lipsitz high art as traditional academic art, and high music is art music. Historical reception and appropriation define artistic manifestations as popular and cultural expressions that “speak to both residual memories of the past and emergent hopes for the future.” (1990: 13) That discourse reflects the dominant culture. This explanation might apply to the music of *Malpaís*, which is neither art music nor folklore. On the one hand, the music represents a counterculture in the context of the transnational flow of commercial music that dominates mass media. On the other hand, music connects through memory to national identity. –That connection is perhaps influenced by the origin of the leaders of the band, Jaime and Fidel Gamboa who are from Guanacaste, the region in Costa Rica where the music was selected as a symbol of the official nationalism back in 1947-. Therefore, the listener recalls memories of the region, while the collective memory connects to a specific historical event, the officialization of music. (Camacho-Azofeifa: 6) However, *Malpaís* is not a medium of official cultural domination.

Music, Memory, and National Identity

Malpaís is a young band of fine and experienced musicians. They have released four recordings, the first in 2002, and the fourth in 2009. The first two recordings make strong references to nostalgia. The third recording recreates stories of rural-urban migration, internal and transnational. The fourth production highlights the national commitment to protect the global environment.

The songs of *Malpaís* contain a multiplicity of possibilities for musical analysis. I will now briefly comment on a selection of songs that I think represent some historical

⁷ Lipsitz, George. *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990.

moments that directly connect to the construction of national identity. Literary and musical narratives of intermarriage, dance hybridization, anti-Imperialist sentiments, human mobilizations and global warming actions, are present in the following examples.⁸

La Chola is the great-grandmother of the Gamboa brothers. *Chola* means indigenous woman. The song talks about going back to childhood. It starts with background references to the jungle, that bring you back to a time when the Spaniards have not arrived yet in Costa Rica. The sound of an *ocarina*, a ceramic-flute used in Mesoamerican cultures, is present throughout the song. Suddenly, a call-and-response music appears bringing references of African culture. From the background, like from a distant place or time, the rhythm of *son guanacasteco*⁹ arrives making its presence stronger as the music advances. The music is making a journey from the past: the pre-Columbian time, the encounter of cultures, the colonial period, and modernity, but as soon as the poetry starts, a crossover happens. The lyrics express a desire to go back in time, to the simplicity of pre-Columbian times when people coexisted with nature. The singer says, “I want to go back to where the Chola is from... and to sow myself between *ocarinas*.”¹⁰ The reference to the *ocarina* is very powerful, because the shapes of these flutes represent indigenous deities. Therefore, the singer not only wants to go back to his childhood, but rather he is expressing a desire to go back to a distant time before modernity.

⁸ Visit www.grupomalpais.com to get the lyrics and musical excerpts

⁹ The *son guanacasteco* rhythm is known as *tambito* in San José. It is organized in a 6/8 meter and follows a pattern of quarter note-eight note, + eight note-quarter note

¹⁰ “*Yo quiero regresar donde la Chola...* (first line)
...*Y volverme a sembrar entre ocarinas*” (penultimate line)

Mazurca de Dámaso. Dámaso was a very old man who worked for the Gamboa's grandfather. He used to cut the grass. This song pictures him at night after drinking. The song refers to his walking like dancing *mazurca* –actually he could not walk firmly because he was drunk. The stepping in the song is his clumsiness. In the songwriter's childhood memories, *Dámaso* is a funny slim spirit, as a skeleton taking care of his grave. *La Chola* used to tell scary stories to the boys every night, and *Dámaso* seems to be a perfect character for those tales. The importance of this song is not only the depiction of a very folkloric image, but also the discussion of dance hybridization. The mazurka¹¹ is a stylized Polish folk dance in triple meter. It is also a folk dance popular in Nicaragua and Guanacaste, but in the compound meter of 6/8. Differences are also in instrumentation and character. Two coincidences are interesting: The compound meter is a marker of the official national music¹² and the grandfather of the Gamboa was originally from Poland.

El Portoncito. This song is a hybrid between Charleston and Brazilian *choro*. You might ask why this is in the imagination of Costa Rican music. The transnational musical flow is not something new, and with the *vitrola* new foreign genres were easily adopted. In the early twenty-century, genres as fox trot, one-step, Charleston, and jazz were sensed as threat for the recent construction of nationality. Following the logistics of the nation-state it was urgent to define a musical symbol strong enough to counteract this musical invasion. This historical moment is important because on the one hand, it stimulated the search and definition of a form of national music, and on the other, it helps to exemplify

¹¹ The polish version is spelled with K while the Central American version is spelled with C.

¹² One of the reasons to select the music from Guanacaste as a national symbol was the fascination that musicians had with the 6/8 dances. Among several, the *tambito* also in 6/8 is the official rhythm of Costa Rica.

the anti-imperialist sentiment of the population after the attempt of William Walker to annex Central America to the confederate states of the south.

El Portoncito has explicit references in the music to what the lyrics are trying to convey. It is the story of a man who, following his wife instructions, goes to do some repairs at the gate of their countryside property. While working, he meets a woman and the song and music suggest that a love affair occurs. Some sonic elements as the use of a whistle in ascending sound, the switch of mood, and the increase in speed, are music painting-like references that confirm the affair. The inter-text suggest on the other hand, the cultural intrusion that affects not only music, but also moral values. Since there is an anti-imperial sentiment, not towards the Spanish crown, but to the United States as the new imperial and colonizing menace, the use of an Anglo melody is perhaps the best musical reference.

Presagio. In this song, many references are juxtaposed, merging words and music. As in the previous song, the metaphorical language makes strong connections to memory, increasing a national identification of the public with the music. Sonic references, like the use of a *quijongo*, a type of bow instrument used by the indigenous peoples of Nicaragua and Costa Rica, keeps the memory connected to the historical past. Through the characteristic rhythm played by this instrument, the song connects past and present, lyrics and music, memory and national identity. References as ‘the smell of water,’ ‘drums from the sky,’ ‘dark and scary winds,’ ‘spiders knotted in someone’s hair,’ are metaphors for announcing a storm, in other words, to announce cultural tragedy. Many images of everyday life, like the *mascarada*, a carnival tradition from Europe, which has been transformed into a national cultural manifestation, are included

in the collection of endangered images that the song depicts. The lyrics depicts metaphorically the cultural invasion and ecological destruction caused by modernity, industrialization, and invasive tourism. The object of destruction, the caterpillar that cut the trees, is depicted as a big animal that comes from a faraway place. However, the *quijongo* persists along the song as a reference of resistance.

Más al Norte del Recuerdo. “A little further north than the memory” makes strong references to the past. Since I discuss this song in a previous paper,¹³ I just want to mention that this song works in this paper as a transition between the rural and the urban. The song describes the rural landscape that is not there anymore, that has been transformed by time and space, but continues to live in the memory of individuals, keeping alive cultural sentiments.

Rosa de un día and *Contramarea*, bring new elements of national construction. Migrations constitute an everyday activity in Costa Rica, either internal, or transnational, like the mass immigrations from Nicaragua to Costa Rica. In *Rosa de un día*, the use of tambito-rock like in 6/8 meter makes a strong statement of the rural-urban transition. The singer describes San José as a unique place with not street names but everybody is able to arrive at their destination, where politics and economics emerge and social stratification became stronger after the prosperity of the coffee plantations. It is also a route to pass from one place to other and where for whatever reason the people remain there. San José is also a place where past, present, and future coexist in architecture, in customs, and in desires.

¹³ Camacho-Azofeifa, Tania. “Malpaís: Beyond Nostalgia. Music, Memory and, National Identity in Costa Rica.” Conference paper presented at the Annual Conference Rocky Mountain Council of Latin American Studies, March 5-8, 2009.

*Contramarea*¹⁴ is a rare mix of *mazurca* and *tambito*. This song depicts a tragic story of love between a Costa Rican woman (represented by *tambito*) and a Nicaraguan man (represented by *mazurca*). Both rhythms merge and transform into a new identity, always maintaining a certain degree of independence from one another. This rhythmic combination talks more about the blending of cultures than about differences, suggesting that the impossible love between the woman and man in this story, which is representative of the relationship between Costa Rica and Nicaragua, may be possible one day. The rhythmic reference is a statement of unity between both countries.

The last song that I want to comment on is part of the fourth recording. *Efecto Mariposa*¹⁵ talks about environment, global warming, ecology, and the human collective responsibility toward these topics. A modern sound, which blends blues and rock in *español*, almost in a big band music-like style, tells us that this problem is global and originates in the most developed countries. Cultural Costa Rican references are implicit in the language and in the visuals of the video.

Conclusion

After this brief analysis of the music of Malpaís, we can see the trajectory of some elements that contribute to the formation of national identity. Images from the pre-Columbian past to our current preoccupations for rescuing our planet are an integral part of the Costa Rican nationality. The idea of national identity as homogenous is no longer

¹⁴ For a deeper analysis of *Contramarea*, see conference paper “*Contramarea*: a tragic song of love in the border between Costa Rica and Nicaragua” presented last November 2009 in the Annual Meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology.

¹⁵ For a deeper analysis of *Efecto Mariposa*, see conference paper “*Todo Está Relacionado: Música, Palabras e Imágenes en “Efecto Mariposa” de Malpaís*” presented in the 18th Colloquium on Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Literatures and Linguistics Department of Spanish and Portuguese, University of Texas at Austin, November 13-14, 2009.

possible. National identities are conformed by a multiplicity of identities, represented in the everyday lives of the *Malpaís*' characters.

Artists in general are making an effort to give voice to those that keep being misrepresented. In the last production of *Malpaís*, besides speaking for our planet there are songs that speak for a multiplicity of voices outside of the Guanacaste landscape. Through these songs, the band recognizes that although the music of Guanacaste was once selected to represent the national identity, it cannot hold such a responsibility that blatantly ignores Costa Rica's pluricultural and multiethnic origins.

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