

**“VALLENATO:  
HYBRIDIZATION AND METAMORPHOSIS OF A MUSICAL GENRE OF THE NORTH-  
EAST OF COLOMBIA”**

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**Origin and dissemination.** The *vallenato* is a musical genre of the north-east of Colombia, particularly in the area that once was called Provincia de Santa Marta (today called “La Provincia” par excellence), a large area including the departamentos of Magdalena, Guajira and Cesar. The economy is based mainly in agriculture and breeding. The population shows a tri-ethnic biological a cultural legacy, since Spanish, African and indigenous influences has conformed the *costeño* (as it is called the people of the Caribbean coast of Colombia).

The *vallenato* takes its name from the city of Valledupar, in the Atlantic coast of Colombia. The term “vallenato”, in fact, refers to things or people native of the city of Valledupar (including the “musica vallenata”); indeed, Valledupar is not the center of origin of *vallenato*, but it’s the center of the spread of *vallenato*. The *vallenato*, in fact, is not an urban musical genre, but a musical expression of the culture of the *campesinos* and the *vaqueros* of the Magdalena River valley. The old generations of vallenato musicians, specially accordionists, are peasants coming from small country villages such as El Paso (Cesar), Plato, Padilla (Cesar), San Jacinto (Bolívar).

**Ensemble.** The *vallenato* music belongs to the "costeños" musical genres (such as cumbia, gaita, porro, mapalé, etc.) but unlike those ones, it is not considered a “ritmo” (lit. 'rhythm', meaning also music for dancing) but basically a “cancion” o "aire" (singing), intended mainly to listening, although in certain case it could be danced too. The *canción vallenata* is almost always sung by a male soloist traditionally accompanied by a trio composed by an *acordeon* (diatonic accordion with buttons), *caja* (conical drum with a single head) and *guacharaca* (idiophone to scrape).

Instrument of Austrian origin, but coming from a German factory (Hohner), the diatonic accordion with buttons has undergone to a process of appropriation becoming “the” Colombian instrument associated to vallenato. It consists of 31 buttons located on the right hand divided into three rows (10+11+10), for the melody and 12 (6+6) on the left hand for the bass. The pitch is specially adjusted to provide the warm yet penetratingly reedy sound that vallenato performers favour according to the high register vocal style.

The construction characteristics of the instrument have influenced the harmonic structure of the song as the system of emission of air with the bellows involved the alternation of two basses: tonic (I) and dominant (V). It is assumed that the accordion has arrived in the Guajira Peninsula in the late nineteenth century through the port of Riohacha with smugglers on the islands of Aruba and Curacao, or when German immigrants and traders began to navigate the Rio Magdalena in the middle of nineteenth century (under the government of General Francisco de Paula Santander).

From the moment of his arrival at the end of XIX century, the accordion has been widely spread in the *Provincia*, which has undergone a process of ownership by the working class particularly in the countryside (a similar process occurred in the context of Italian folk music, especially in the Marche, where it is still played for *saltarello* dance and where a factory of accordions was founded: the Paolo Soprani in Castelfidardo). In Colombia, the accordion is considered as synonymous with vallenato.

About the *caja* (single-head drum played with hands – belonging to the same type of African derived drums used in the Caribbean coast of Colombia), has undergone to some changes in the last decades: in the past it was made in wood, originally covered with goatskin, while a wood or fibreglass drum with a synthetic head (with metal locking screws), more reliable in the heat and humidity, is more common today.

The *guacharaca*, made by a cane called “lata” (*Bactris minor*) has also been replaced but only in popular band by the most resonating metal tubular scraper, used since ‘60s by the group Corraleros de Majagual.

From the organological point of view, the *conjunto vallenato* for a long time was considered as the synthesis of the three cultural contributions conforming the Colombian nation (European, African and indigenous), represented by the *acordeón* (European), the *caja* (African) and *guacharaca* (indigenous).

But the three-cultural and three-ethnic “mestizaje” occurred in colonial era (under the rule of the Spaniards), while vallenato music is a recent phenomenon of the republican period.

[F] We find the first historical (that is written reference) to this instrumental ensemble in the travel account *Rioacha y los Indios guajiros* written in 1880 by the French chronicler Henri Chandelier, who has travelled in the Guajira Peninsula in the late nineteenth century. He reports that in that land is danced a "Cubiembra" (probably "cumbiamba") to the sound of *acordeon*, *caja* and *guacharaca*,

(that is the traditional vallenato trio) but it is not mentioned the term "vallenato", that it seems much more recent.<sup>1</sup>

**Repertoire.** The *canción vallenata* can be performed by four canonical forms differentiated by rhythm and agogic: *son*, *paseo* (in double meter/simple binary 2/4), *merengue* (no relation with the Dominican genre, in triple meter 6/8), and *puya* (fast tempo binary meter).

**Stylistic characteristics.** The Vallenato is an hybrid musical form, featuring a song with text in Spanish, but it doesn't shows melismas of Hispanic type (such as the *cante jondo*) rather a syllabic vocal style, and the voice is strong and sharp, with a highly syncopated melodic line development (such as the phrasing of the accordion).

The harmonic structure is based mainly on a progression of Tonic/Dominant (or Tonic/Subdominant/Dominant) on mayor modes, according to the harmonic possibilities of the diatonic accordion, while the *caja* plays a constant rhythmic pattern with some *revuelos*, variations at the end of each phrases, and *guacharaca* plays always an invariaed pattern.

**Form.** The metric and strophic structure is characterized by the use of eight-syllable stanza (*cuartetas*), but rarely we can find the form of *décimas* (improvised stanzas of 10 lines).

**Occasions.** The traditional occasions on which the vallenato is performed are the *Parrandas*, folk gathering held in the *cantina* where people play games, drink beer, gaseosas or aguardiente, and seldom dance. In Colombia, the word *parrandiar* has become synonymous with "partying, having fun".

The *parranda* has a double function, as "recreational", social gatherings for entertainment, and also as "re-creative" in the sense that is the place and the moment in which the singers and musicians 'create' new compositions or 're-create' new lyrics on a pre-existent melodic formulas and rhythmic

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<sup>1</sup> «La "Cubiembra" es la danza de los obreros danza absolutamente indígena.[...] Hacia las 8 de la noche, tres músicos vienen a apoyarse contra el poste, un hombre con un acordeón, otro con tambor y otro tocando "Guacharaca". Preludian algunos aires, es la invitación. Todo el mundo conoce el acordeón, importado de Alemania los tambores o mejor dicho el tamboril, tiene esa particularidad en su forma de cono truncado y no tiene una sola piel: es algo parecido al instrumento de los negros de la Martinica . También se coloca entre las piernas y se toca con las manos. "La Guacharaca" no se parece a ningún otro instrumento con el que se lo pueda comparar. Es un pequeño tallo de madera, plana, de una caña y de dos dedos de largo, cubierta con una delgada placa de hierro o de cinc con dientes en forma de sierra, con muescas parecidas a una cremallera si usted prefiere. Con la mano izquierda se sostiene ese bastón, mientras con la derecha armada de un pequeño pedacito del tamaño y grueso de un lápiz, raspa el instrumento subiendo y bajando. Esto produce un ruido destinado a acompañar a los otros instrumentos» (H. Candelier 1880, trad. eletrónica in spagnolo: [www.banrepcultural.org/book/export/html/31022](http://www.banrepcultural.org/book/export/html/31022)).

patterns. Only a few of these songs will be included in the 'traditional' repertoire for popular acceptance, becoming “classics” of vallenato.

**The musicians, prestige and social status.** The *Parranda* is fading out and the main opportunities for *acordeoneros* to perform are the many folk festivals; the old generations, such as Francisco “Pacho” Rada (1907-2003), Alejandro “Alejo” Duran (1919-1989), Nicholas “Colacho” Mendoza (1936-2003), Emiliano Zuleta and brother Antonio “Toño” Salas, Lorenzo Morales (1914), Leandro Diaz, etc. has great prestige in the popular costeño culture and their lives (including their person) are surrounded by a mythical aura. In contrast, in the urban culture of the upper-middle class, *acordeonero* is frowned upon, as he is considered *parrandero*, and *mujeriego*, *borrachero*. (...)

**Lyrics.** As a form of oral literature, the vallenato is the manifestation of the *campesino* and *vaquero* culture of oral tradition of "La Provincia". Usually the lyrics deals with love in usual sentimental fashion, but in earlier times the songs reflected more everyday life. It is what happens in some *paseo* telling an event or a small daily occurrence. According to the folklorist Guillermo Abadia Morales, the *vallenato* had an important social function, that of “periodico cantado” (sung newspaper): they tell of real events and was a means of communication to inform people of the villages surrounding the events that occurred in previous days in the region. Some lyrics of the *canciones vallenatas* deals with politics; one example is the son-paseo “el Presidente” composed by Julio Bovea dedicated to the Colombian dictator Rojas Pinilla.

In some cases, the songs present a satirical character in which there is scorn with an adversary in which musical abilities are measured. The challenge, the competition, the rivalry is mostly present in the form called *piquerías*: it is a challenge at a distance in which the *acordeóneros* improvised verses mocking direct opponent. Some legendary *piquerías* entered in the “cultural heritage” of the history of vallenato, such as "La gota fría" and "El gallo viejo", which shows rivalry between two renowned acordeoneros: Emiliano Zuleta and Lorenzo Morales [“La gota fria” means “the cold drop” referring to sweat for fear for the adversary; in the “gallo viejo” (old cock) appears some terms having specific meanings in *vallenato*: “gallo” (cock) is a smart person, “pollo” (chicken) is a coward person (referred to Toño Salas, accordionist brother of Emiliano Zuleta)].

**La leyenda vallenata.** It is very common in this region the local legend of “Francisco El Hombre” traditionally regarded as the pioneer, or rather a "cultural hero" of the vallenato music, a man (‘El Hombre’) - there is a controversy about who is Francisco El Hombre - whose extraordinary ability

to play the accordion allowed him to cast out the devil in a musical duel with the enemy, praying God with a vallenato song. In the legend of Francisco El Hombre can be found several characteristics of the vallenato:

I) feature is the mixture of legend and reality, or between myth and truth: el *real maravilloso*. The poetics of the "real maravilloso" by Gabriel García Márquez<sup>2</sup> was born from these tales. The Colombian writer (Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982) went to pick up the Nobel in Sweden bringing with him a conjunto vallenato for the awards ceremony!). The vallenato acquires its own features as well-defined genre of folk during the '20s and '30s, when it spreads in the geographical area known as the 'Zona Bananera' near Santa Marta (Magdalena) with workers from the 'Provincia'. And it is precisely here, in the "Zone Bananera" which are set many of his novels, beginning with *Cien años de soledad*. In the novel *Cien años de soledad*, 'Gabo' places the mythical character of 'Francisco the Man' in his Macondo.<sup>3</sup>The same Colombian writer said: "Cien años de Soledad was a vallenato of 350 pages".

II) feature: the sense of challenge, the challenged opponent with a virtuoso performance, the envy of rivals, competing to assert their primacy, etc. we can find all these topics in *piquerias*. In addition, the topic of the 'challenge' with the devil as well as the 'pact' with the devil are part of the 'mythical' African-American landscape (see the bluesmen like Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, etc.).

In 1992 I met in Cartagena an old *tamborero* (drummer) native of San Antonio (a small village near the ancient Palenque of San Onofre, Sucre), Encarnación Tovar, called "El Diablo" ('Devil') for his extreme - "diabolical" - ability to play any instrument had fallen into his hands. "El Diablo" always carried with him an amulet, a bag of herbs, which typically gripped in his left hand before playing,

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<sup>2</sup> He was born in Aracataca (Magdalena)

<sup>3</sup> "Meses después volvió Francisco el Hombre, un anciano trotamundos de casi 200 años que pasaba con frecuencia por Macondo divulgando las canciones compuestas por él mismo. En ellas, "Francisco el Hombre" relataba con detalles minuciosos las noticias ocurridas en los pueblos de su itinerario, desde Manaure hasta los confines de la Ciénaga, de modo que si alguien tenía un recado que mandar o un acontecimiento que divulgar, le pagaba dos centavos para que lo incluyera en su repertorio. Fue así como se enteró Ursula de la muerte de su madre, por pura casualidad, una noche que escuchaba las canciones con la esperanza de que dijeran algo de su hijo José Arcadio. "Francisco el Hombre", así llamado porque derrotó al diablo en un duelo de improvisación de cantos, y cuyo verdadero nombre no conoció nadie, desapareció de Macondo durante la peste del insomnio y una noche reapareció sin ningún anuncio en la tienda de "Catarino". Todo el pueblo fue a escucharlo para saber qué había pasado en el mundo. En esa ocasión llegaron con él una mujer tan gorda que cuatro indios tenían que llevarla cargada en un mecedor, y una mulata adolescente de aspecto desamparado que la protegía del sol con un paraguas. Aureliano fue esa noche a la tienda de "Catarino". Encontró a "Francisco el Hombre", como un camaleón monolítico, sentado en medio de un círculo de curiosos. Cantaba las noticias con su vieja voz discordada, acompañándose con el mismo acordeón arcaico que le regaló Sir Walter Raleigh en la Guayana, mientras llevaba el compás con sus grandes pies caminadores agrietados por el salitre."

reciting prayers with apotropaic function, namely to protect themselves from the evil eye that might throw envious rivals (as the *mojo* of the bluesmen).

**Social status of vallenato musicians.** As the "música de acordeon" is an expression of the low social strata of *campesinos* and *vaqueros*, was rejected by the upper and middle class citizens, considered that the music of the 'rabble'; the "high society" of Valledupar (as well of the Andean cities) preferred the "Bailes de Salon" (waltz, polkas, mazurkas, etc..) accompanied by the brass bands. This discriminatory distinction was aimed to accentuate the social distance in a strong classist society. In the first recordings of vallenato, in the forties, appear the guitar, besides the accordion (and then replacing it), as it was considered more refined and more "Andean" than the accordion, an instrument associated to lower class and therefore considered too vulgar.

The first recording of vallenato was the *paseo* "Las cosas de las mujeres", composed by Abel Antonio Villa recorded for the label Odeon of Chile in 1944. The line-up were Guillermo Buitrago (guitar), Abel Antonio Villa (accordion), Ezequiel Rodriguez (guacharaca). The recordings of the group of Rafael Escalona in the '50s were very successful; the line-up was: two guitars and a guacharaca: this ensemble at the time received wide acclaim among the people living in the "interior" (the inhabitants of the cities in the Andean region), whose musical tradition (bambuco, guabina, pasillo, torbellino, etc..) is based on stringed instruments, such as tiple, bandola, guitar, etc.

In Colombia, *vallenato* music is immediately associated with the figure of Rafael Escalona (1927-2009), icon and symbol of *vallenato*, an atypical composer since it does not play any instrument nor sing, nor knew how to write music;<sup>4</sup> he belonged to the elite town who considered the accordion not appropriated to their status.<sup>5</sup> In fact, having been one of the first vallenato composers to have access to the national record industry (in the '50s and '60s Colombian companies such as DISCOS

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<sup>4</sup> Unlike the acordeoneros who were the protagonists of the history of Vallenato, Escalona does not play any instrument. Unlike musicians such as Alejo Durán, Leandro Díaz and Emiliano Zuleta, who gave voice to their compositions, Escalona rarely sings. Moreover, unlike the farmers and cattlemen poor and often illiterate, Escalona comes from a wealthy family and aristocratic. Those who belonged to the Upper class, sometimes attended the Parrandas but considered to compose and play vallenato music as an attitude of the lower classes.

<sup>5</sup> That's what he said in an interview: "Cuando comencé a hacer canciones -dijo una vez- no había compositores vallenatos, sino acordeoneros. El acordeonero era un tipo analfabeta, el ordeñador, el mozo de la finca. Y yo irrumpí en ese mundo, por eso me crecieron tanto las orejas, porque por estar oyendo acordeoneros, mi mamá (Margarita Martínez) me tiraba de las orejas y me decía que eso era para los plebeyos".

FUENTES, DISCO TROPICAL, DISCOS SONOLUX) Rafael Escalona was the first 'spokesman' of the vallenato throughout the country.

**The vallenato from regional to national genre.** Originally a 'regional music', *vallenato* was born among the working class of the north-east of Colombia, with little resonance at the national level, and it was associated with the folk culture of the lower classes in the social hierarchy; the 'música de acordeon' was for the 'gente del pueblo' (country people). Starting from the Sixties and during the '70s and '80s, it spread throughout the country to acquire a status of national music (second only to cumbia). The acceptance by the upper classes and the subsequent change of status of vallenato music from regional to national music occurs as a consequence of two factors:

I) access to the media. The first reason is without doubt the marketing of Vallenato in the '40s by Julio Torres, Guillermo Buitrago and Rafael Escalona. It was thanks to the 'cultivated' composers that the vallenato was introduced in the middle class of Colombian society.

If the first records were made by the 'Negro' Alejo (Alejandro Durán), or brother Náfer Durán, both renowned mixed-black acordeoneros of a rural village of Cesar, vallenato perhaps would not have obtained the acceptance by the urban society (creole and mestizo). In 1950, the "Negro Durán" recorded his first two 78 rpm records ("Entusiasmos de las mujeres " and "Guapajé") self-produced and self-distributed (which he sold door to door among the countries of the coast). In 1968 he was crowned "Rey del Vallenato" in the first edition of the *Festival de la Leyenda Vallenato* in Valledupar (1968), first in a long line of awards he won until his death in 1989. The history of black music in America has many similarities and coincidences: the first recording of jazz was carried out by a white band, the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, in the same way the first records of vallenato, the music of Afro-Colombian Caribbean coast, were recorded by a group of white men with instruments outside the traditional native.

II) music as a legitimate value. The second factor is the legitimacy conferred by the former President Alfonso Lopez Michelsen, coming from the north-east of Colombia (he was the first governor of Cesar); it is under his presidency that the *vallenato* had a strong impulse to spread throughout the country (legitimized by a high position in the State) . He was the main promoter of the Festival de la Leyenda Vallenato (1967), [along with Consuelo Araujo and Rafael Escalona], which is celebrated annually in the square that bears his name: Plaza López Michelsen. Even today

it is one of the best opportunities to hear the current stars of vallenato music, where it is crowned the "rey" (king) of vallenato.

Within a few years, therefore, from being a regional expression of the local folk cultural of La Provincia, vallenato music becomes a popular mass music, undergoing inevitable changes. As stated by the acordeonero Alejo Duran, the vallenato "dejó de ser campesino y has logrado civilizarse". This metamorphosis of the vallenato becomes more and more catchy, danceable (and thus more marketable) mixing with other genres such as rancheras and boleros (vallenato "arrancherado" and "abolerado"); in addition, the texts give a syrupy romantic typical cheesy commercial pop-inspired lyrics.

In the '60s, acordeon and vallenato had an extraordinary diffusion all around Latin America thanks to the record companies (such as Odeon Chile, Discos Fuentes Colombia, etc) and thanks to the concerts of the group Corraleros de Majagual: a big band with a brass section (bombardin and saxophone), percussion and two accordions; they forged a middle way between cumbia and vallenato (for ex., combining up-beat accents on cymbal and "chucuchucu" pattern on scraper).

With an instrumental structure made up basically of a "brass band" and two accordions, *Los Corraleros de Majagual* contributed to the circulation and popularization of cumbia and vallenato in the entire country and in other nations where they played, like Mexico, Ecuador, and Peru.

The virtuoso Alfredo Gutierrez was for long time the accordionist of Los Corraleros; when he started his career as soloist, he introduced some innovations in the instrumental ensemble, such as the introduction of electric bass, and then the harp, violin and hawaiian guitar (ukulele?) and extra-percussion section (conga and cowbell). He is a highly entertaining musician, whose party trick is to play the accordion with his toes; according to his point of view, he tried to "modernize" vallenato, in fact in an interview he declares/sentences of having "civilized the vallenato" and have the merit of "commercialization, nationalization and internationalization of the vallenato".

**Vallenato and drug.** In the seventies, the economy of the north-east of Colombia suffered a deep change for the phenomenon of drug trading: the cultivation of marijuana takes the place of bananas (much less profitable), the area becomes one of the hot spots of cocaine trading, the mafia bring rivers of dollars but also violence, corruption and abuse. The new 'talents' of vallenato are those who - like Alfredo Gutierrez [which is not 'vallenato' but 'sabanero'] became rich and famous

praising the *mafiosos* and benefit from this work (although this kind of *vallenato* did not become a “genre” as the “narco-corrado” in Mexico).

**Vallenato-Revival**-The ‘80s marked a revival of the vallenato due to the success of a soap opera (Latin America’s popular tele-novelas) titled "Escalona" in which the singer, guitarist and actor Carlos Vives played the role of composer Rafael Escalona . The record produced by the television series was so successful that Carlos Vives set-up a group called La Provincia, with whom he made numerous recordings and tours in South America, becoming soon a rock-vallenato star. Its modern production techniques, precise arrangements and a talented band (La Provincia) coupled with Vives’s fine voice and charismatic stage presence turned vallenato into a modern pop music (with a “local” tinge).

The repertoire of his group consists mainly of songs 'traditional' but not ‘anonymous’, since they are products of the creativity of folk artists recognized in the Province, as Emiliano Zuleta, Alejandro Duran, Francisco "Pacho" Rada, Leandro Diaz, Rafael Escalona. While referring to the “classical” vallenato repertoire, Carlos Vives, gives a modern form of his music in arrangements and instrumentation, begins a process of hybridization, which combines traditional instruments, such as accordion, caja and gaitas (indigenous flutes), with rock –pumping basslines, driving drums and guitar.

With this new formula, Vives managed to bring new generations to the vallenato, usually very reluctant to accordion music, trying to integrate the old with the new, the past and present, folk with rock, with the aim to obtain the consent of both new and past generations. In 2002, Carlos Vives filled the stadiums in Colombia (50,000 people) and get 6 nominations at Latin Grammy for the album "Dejame entrar" which has sold millions of copies and won numerous awards in Latin America and the United States.

### **Conclusions:**

Nowadays, the occasions when the *vallenato* music is performed are the many folk festivals dedicated to the accordion music and vallenato, held all the year long around all the country: *Festival de la Leyenda Vallenata* in Valledupar, *Festival Sabanero de Acordeón* in Sincelejo, *Festival Cuna de Acordeones* in Villanueva, *Festival de la Canción y Acordeoneros* in Ayapel, *Festival de Acordeones* in Barranquilla, *Festival Bolivarense del Acordeon* in Arjona, *Festival de Acordeones* in Maicao, *Festival di Acordeoneros y Compositores* in Buenavista, *Festival Nacional*

*Vallenato "Rafael Orozco" in Bogotá, Encuentro Nacional de Acordeoneros in Villeta, Festival de Acordeones in Soledad, Festival de Compositores y Acordeoneros in Guamo, Festival de Acordeones in Urumita, Festival Sabanero del Acordeòn in Sincelejo, Festival de compositores vallenatos in San Juan del Cesar, and so on (the last one is the Festival Mundial del Vallenato.*<sup>6</sup>

In the last decades, we can observe a process of revitalization of traditional vallenato in the country villages of the north-east of Colombia (but not limited to that area). This revitalization was not “induced” by the market, the record industry, the media, etc. but from “inside” the *costeño* culture. As a sort of circle, the vallenato seems to come back to the “roots” and the protagonists of this process of revitalization are the young generations, namely the kids.

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<sup>6</sup> Many of these folk festivals, once supported by ColCultura (Instituto Colombiano de Cultura now replaced by the Ministry of Culture) and sponsored by beer and aguardiente factories, are now supported by the Fundacion BAT (British-American Tobacco Co.).